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EXCELLENCE, LIKE COURAGE, CAN BECOME A HABIT

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Editor's Note

China's Himalayan climb-down but there is need to be watchful

WHEN US REPUBLICAN, Michael McCaul, tweeted "It's heartening to see India stand strong in defending its sovereignty," it was clear that Beijing has finally seen reason and retracted. His earlier tweet that "The Chinese Communist Party's constant territorial aggression, from the East and South China Seas to the waters of the Mekong, to the Himalayas, has no place in the 21st century, " indicated that the international community was aghast at Chinese military and economic expansionism.

The cover story of TEHELKA's current issue is on how and why Beijing has shown unusual alacrity in announcing to the world that mutual troop withdrawal had begun and the nine-month-long border standoff was as good as over. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue called Quad which has committed to 'uphold a rules-based international order underpinned by respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty' made China see reason and its announcement of a climb down came soon.

Quad is a strategic forum between India, US, Japan and Australia and its on record that China had sent diplomatic protests to all four members of Quad before any formal convention of its members.

It was only a day later that Defence Minister Rajnath Singh confirmed in Parliament that the pullback had commenced but hastened to add that India had not ceded any territory. The agreement is on disengagement in the North and South banks of Pangong lake in eastern Ladakh in a "phased, coordinated and verifiable" manner.

India and China had gathered a large number of battle tanks, and heavy equipment in the high-altitude areas of eastern Ladakh region after tension escalated following a bloody clash in the Galwan Valley last year in June.

This left 20 Indian soldiers including a commanding officer dead in the fierce hand-to-hand combat on June 15 in the Galwan Valley, an incident that marked the most serious military conflicts between the two sides in decades.

After almost 8-9 months, China has now finally disclosed that four of its soldiers were killed in the Galwan valley hand-to-hand clash though according to an American intelligence report, the number of casualties on the Chinese side was 35 or even higher.

As tensions show signs of easing, China has gone in an overdrive to claim victory perhaps a face-saving exist and has announced gallantry awards for five of its soldiers involved in the clash including four who were killed in action.

Though China has pulled back, India needs to be watchful and can't trust China in view of its military and economic expansionism.

China's climb down could be deceptive and only a ploy to counter criticism from the international community. The oft quoted Shakespearean adage aptly applies to China that "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain"!

CHARANJIT AHUJA

Tehelka

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TOP STORIES FROM THE MAGAZINE & WEBSITE

DISASTROUS DELUGE

The Uttarakhand glacier burst, which claimed scores of lives, should prompt a review of how the Himalayas are treate, reports ***Mudit Mathur***

BUDGET 2021-22: AN ATTEMPT TO PULL UP THE PANDEMIC-HIT ECONOMY

The proposed hike in expenditure on infrastructure, healthcare and an increase in insurance sector FDI cap invite mixed reactions, reports ***Amit Agnihotri***

FARM LAWS' STIR, TWITTER RAGE AND INDIA'S IMAGE

The recent developments may flag the Indian spirit of standing together against foreign interference but they can't wish away the fact that India's image has taken a beating, writes ***Kumkum Chadha***

CIVIC BODIES POLLS — A LITMUS TEST FOR MAIN PARTIES IN PUNJAB

Seen as a semi-final for the Assembly elections scheduled for early 2022, the municipal polls are being fought separately by all the four political majors in the state this time, reports ***Rajesh Moudgil***

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DISASTROUS DELUGE
The Uttarakhand glacier burst, which claimed dozens of lives, should prompt a review of how the Himalayas are treated
THE BUDGET IS A BID TO PULL UP THE COVID-HIT ECONOMY
AS SITUATION IMPROVES, B'WOOD LOOKS TO REVIVE ITS TIES WITH KASHMIR

OTT PLATFORMS NEED CENSORSHIP

With reference to the Vanity Fair report "OTT gives wider scope to writers" (February 28)

While the line between vulgarity and sensuality is very thin, the content on popular OTT platforms seems to have erased that line in many instances.

There appears to be no censor; the language used in content is shocking. If this goes unregulated, children are bound to be affected as they could think it is fine to use unparliamentary language.

SATISH REDDY KANAGANTI

Economic development must be sustainable

With reference to the Cover Story "Disastrous deluge" by Mudit Mathur (February 28)

Time and again we have seen and experienced the vagaries of nature but we still continue to ignore them as if they have no connection with us. This time the result has been destroyed hydel projects and a giant wave of water and sediments, which have swept away everything in their path.

Many people are still missing, some are no more, there are huge economic losses, and there is a change in the natural topography. Are there any other vulnerabilities which can trigger similar events in future? Economic development is necessary but it must be sustainable. We must not forget that it is "we" who are altering nature.

KISHOR BANSAL

Although the reasons for the disaster are not yet fully known, the widespread belief is that this is a result of climate change impacting the sensitive Himalayan ecosystem. If the accelerated melting of the Himalayan glaciers continues, we may face many such adverse events.

There should be a proper balance between developmental initiatives and the ecology. There are numerous polluting industrial units and large hydel projects in this region which are inadvisable.

Apart from a plan of action to conserve the Himalayan ecosystem, there needs to be a marking of highly sensitive zones in the Himalayas.

KALAPALA VINOD KUMAR

Large hydroelectric power plants in a fragile zone are a recipe for disaster, notwithstanding the economic benefits associated with it.
The root of the problem lies in the construction of too many projects in this fragile and eco-sensitive zone despite judicial rulings.

VIJAY SINGH ADHIKARI

Sasikala getting rousing welcome is indigestible

With reference to the report "Sasikala returns to massive welcome" (February 9)

It was a shock to read about and see the visuals of the sea of humanity waiting to greet and catch a glimpse of VK Sasikala, the former aide of late Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa, on her return to Chennai. In fact, it is very difficult to read the pulse of the people in this part of the country as far as politics is concerned.

Be that as it may, the AIADMK's Edappadi K. Palaniswami has his task cut out — to keep the party united and fight two enemies, the DMK's Stalin and Sasikala, successfully in the coming State Assembly elections.

S. RAMAKRISHNASAYEE

I am quite uncomfortable with the media coverage given to someone jailed for corruption. Her return and the likelihood of disturbances within the AIADMK are internal affairs of that party.

T ANAND RAJ

At times, speech is silver but silence is golden

With reference to the online report "Rajnath Singh says disengagement has begun at Pangong Lake, China will move troops to east of Finger 8" by Tehelka WebDesk (February 11)

It was only natural for China to seize on comments by the Union Minister of State for Road Transport and Highways and former Army Chief, General VK Singh, on India transgressing the Line of Actual Control more times than China.

It was an unexpected windfall for China. Isn't it fair to ask when will leaders like him in the government learn that there are times when speech is silver but silence is golden?

CG KURIAKOSE

The mutual disengagement of India and China in Eastern Ladakh must also be linked to the mix of four instruments that India has used in keeping the pressure on China: direct engagement, strong military build-up, economic measures, and international partnerships. At the same time, Delhi needs to be cautious here. We do not know when Beijing can reverse its moves. The fundamental issues remain as the LAC is undemarcated and the India-China strategic rivalry is out in the open.

N. SADHASIVA REDDY

War against Twitter and NewsClick is deplorable

With reference to the report "Lawfully passed orders binding on any business entity, must be obeyed immediately: Govt to Twitter" by TEHELKA WebDesk (February 11)

Targeting responsible journalism that mirrors the dissent and protest of citizens and baselessly promoting the accusation of a foreign inspired/funded conspiracy while allowing unbridled freedom to irresponsible journalism of the kind done by a leading TV anchor who was in the news speaks volumes about the intolerant spirit of the present government.

Protests and agitations are a part and parcel of a healthy democracy. Trying to defame or smother all genuine protests and journalism using the might of the state amounts to autocracy. Why democratically elected governments in the largest democracy are so intolerant towards dissent and protests is intriguing. The quite deplorable war against Twitter and NewsClick in connection with the farmers' protests reminds me of the UPA's notorious IB report following the Kudankulam protests, alleging that NGOs were engaging in anti-national activities. Whether it was the UPA or the NDA now, people agitating for genuine causes are always anti-nationals.

SUKUMARAN CV

Arbitrary arrests, with scant regard to the rules of the game, incarceration on flimsy and unproven grounds, and a high level of intolerance have become the order of the day in India today.

The inability of the government to stomach even the slightest criticism of its policies or its leadership is amply manifest in the goings-on in the country today and it certainly does not augur well for the future as dissent is a sine qua non in a vibrant democracy.

The first term of office of this NDA government (2014-2019) was infinitely better than the second term, that has witnessed among other things, the reduced stature of Parliament and the passing of draconian laws by the Centre and the States where the BJP is in the saddle. The only silver lining is that the government's all-out-bid to stifle dissent has not really succeeded.

CV ARAVIND

Many Indians have voted for the BJP in the hope of living better and enjoying key rights as enshrined in the Constitution. But the government seems to be leading India toward some kind of a dictatorship.

Actions now amount to subjugating if not terrorising us into not expressing displeasure of the style of governance.

C. SACHIDANANDA NARAYANAN

Transparency is prerequisite for Covid-19 investigation

With reference to the report "Gujarat CM Vijay Rupani tests positive for Covid-19" by Tehelka WebDesk (February 15)

More than a year after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are none the wiser about its origins. The findings of WHO's expert team, though tentative, seem to buttress the Chinese government's protestations of innocence. Transparency is a prerequisite for this investigation as WHO must provide definitive answers.

SS PAUL

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I, Swinder Bajwa, hereby declare that the particulars given are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

sd/-

Dated: 01 March 2021 Swinder Bajwa

First woman to be hanged in India since 1947

Uttar Pradesh's Shabnam, who is one of the two convicts in the Amroha murder case, will be the first Indian woman who will be hanged to death after India's independence. This is the first case since 1947 because two sisters, Seema Mohan Gavit and Renuka Kiran Shinda convicted of kidnapping 13 children and murdering 9 have been given death sentence by the High Court but their execution has not yet been carried out. However, in the case of Shabnam and her accomplice Salim, the District and Sessions Court sentenced the duo to death on July 14, 2010, the Allahabad High Court and then The Supreme Court of India upheld the death sentence. The Mercy petition before the President of India too was rejected with which all options may have been exhausted. A news story by **SHVETA MISHRA**

The death warrant for executing her at the Mathura Jail is due to be signed anytime now. The Mathura Jail administration has already started preparations to hang this Uttar Pradesh resident who was found guilty of murdering seven members of her family. India's only female execution room was built in Mathura jail nearly 150 years ago during the British rule in 1870. But no female convict has been hanged there since Independence. The only mention of this hanging room in India can be found in the UP Jail Manual, 1956, which lays out elaborate rules for the execution of women convicts on death row.

Meerut's hangman Pawan Jallad, who also carried out the execution of the 2012 Delhi gangrape and murder case convicts, has been asked to put Shabnam to the gallows. The hangman has already inspected Uttar Pradesh's only female execution centre situated in Mathura. It has been reported that the Mathura Jail administration has also ordered the rope used for hanging death row convicts.

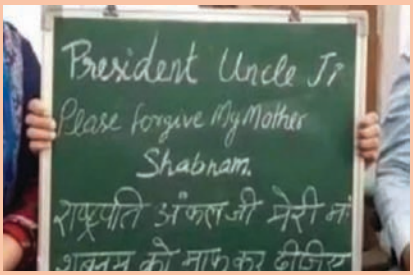
The incident dates back to 2008. Shabnam used to live with her family in Amroha. Shabnam and Salim were having an affair and wanted to get married. However, Shabnam's family was opposed to their marriage so the duo planned the brutal murder. She was arrested on April 19, 2008, five days after the sensational murders, along with her lover Salim. She was seven weeks pregnant when she was arrested. She delivered a baby in December 2008.

As Mathura jail prepares for Shabnam's execution, her 12-year-old son Taj Mohammed may not inherit his maternal grandfather's property. Till now, four women have been handed the death sentence — Sonia from Haryana, Renuka and Seema from Maharashtra, and Seema apart from Shabnam, who is from UP. All of them are awaiting their death warrant

She has a double MA (English and Geography) and taught at the village primary school. During the investigation, it was found that Shabnam had abetted Salim in the crime as she made her family members drink milk laced with sedatives before hacking them to death. She didn't even spare her little nephew who was strangled to death. On the day of judgment, the court heard the statements of as many as 29 witnesses. The 160-page order was passed after all witnesses were asked to answer 649 questions related to the case.

The District and Sessions Court sentenced the duo to death on July 14, 2010. In 2010, the duo challenged the Sessions court's verdict in the Allahabad High Court. The HC too upheld the death sentence. Shabnam and Salim then approached the Supreme Court but the top court upheld the death sentence in 2015. Since all legal options had been

exhausted, Shabnam then filed a mercy plea before the President of India which was rejected too.



Minor son appeals

While preparations are underway at the Mathura Jail to execute Shabnam, the Amroha woman who was found guilty of murdering seven members of her family, her minor son has now appealed to President Ram Nath Kovind for clemency. Shabnam's son Taj has made an emotional appeal to President Ram Nath Kovind urging him to forgive his mother's heinous crime and revoke her death sentence.

The appeal by Shabnam's son has come at a time when the death warrant for executing her at the Mathura Jail is due to be signed anytime. In his appeal to the President, Taj has urged him to pardon his mother's heinous crime.

Taj often goes to the Rampur jail to meet his mother who has been sentenced to death for the sensational Amoraha murder case of 2008. Taj recalled that his mother loves him very much, hugs him and gives him money whenever he visits her in jail.

Shabnam's only child, Taj, who now lives in Sushant Vihar Colony of Bulandshahar with his custodian Usman Saifi, has urged the President "not to take him away from his mother's care and guardianship." It may be recalled that Taj was born in jail, but when he was just 6 years old, he was shifted out of the jail and handed over to Usman Saifi — his custodian — by the Amroha district administration. Taj is currently studying in a prestigious school in Bulandshahr district.

Earlier in a bizarre case, Seema Mohan Gavit (born 1975) and her elder sister Renuka Kiran Shinde (born 1973) were charged with thirteen cases of kidnapping and nine murders. The sessions court found them guilty of kidnapping and murdering six children. The High Court gave a verdict that the prosecution proved five of the cases and confirmed the death sentence. This was a classical example of how parenting can go way wrong. It all started with their mother, Anjana Bai, who had no life skills except for pickpocketing and snatching jewelry in crowded places and had about 125 cases lodged against her for petty thieving, and her then-husband, Mohan Gavit, was sick and tired of having constant altercations with the cops for the same. He left her and remarried Pratibha in the year 1990.

This angered Anjana Bai and she and her daughters, Renuka and Seema, decided to kidnap and kill Mohan's eldest daughter with his new wife. What started as a method to collect revenge for him leaving their mother, soon turned into a frenzy of kidnapping for their own selfish purposes. From 1990 to 1996 they kidnapped 43 children, used them for robberies and then murdered them after accomplishing their motive. State police proved 13 of the children's murders in court.

In 1996, Anjanabai planned to murder her ex-husband's daughter, from his second marriage, but the police arrested all three killers before any of them could execute such a plan. At the time of their arrest, Renuka was 29 & Seema was 25. During the process of investigation, a lot of children's clothes and toys were found in their home which led to further investigations. Anjanabai died in prison a year after her arrest. Seema confessed to all her crimes creating a huge stir across the country, especially in Maharashtra. The Kolhapur Court gave a verdict to hang all three of them until death in 2001, which was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2014. Even the President refused their mercy petition. To date, they've not been hanged.

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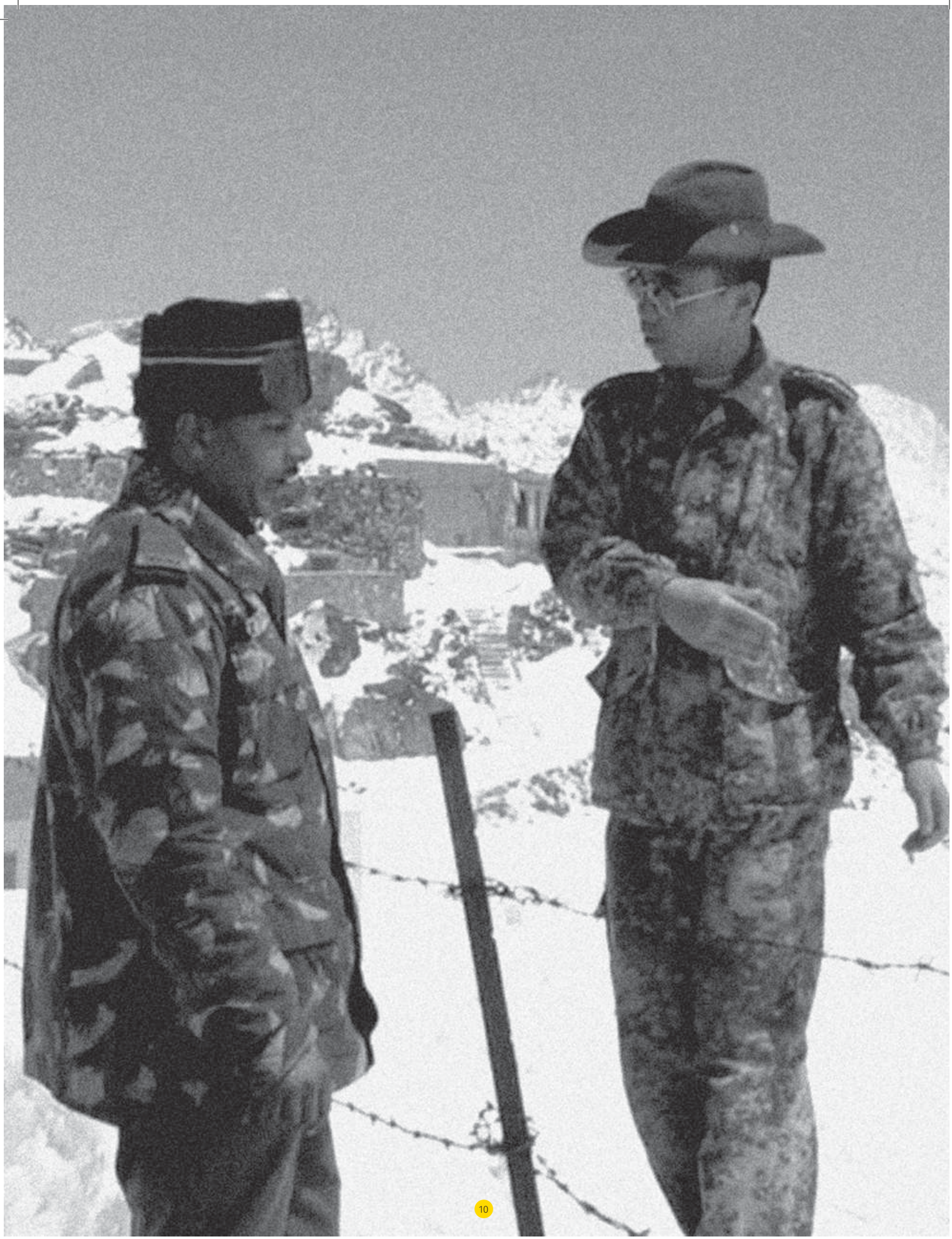

CoverStory

STAND-OFF STANDS ON

No concrete breakthrough in the marathon military talks between India and China in de-escalating the 'friction points'. However, both sides vow to work for a mutually-acceptable resolution through dialogues, reports **GOPAL MISRA**

The world was stunned when China's unprecedented belligerence and the trail of deaths amidst pandemic Covid-19 pushed the mankind to an edge during 2020. It was equally surprised when China ended its prolonged stand-off on the Himalayas with India on February 9, 2021.

It was a mirthless dawn on January 1 heralding New Year, 2021. The world had celebrated Christmas on a low-key. The week-long festivities could not cheer-up the people, though the sun rose on a clear sky on the Friday. The ordeal of the past one year appeared to be never ending.

The Christmas greetings were limited to the exchanges on social media. The inauguration of the new US president, Joe Biden, took place amidst apprehensions and uncertainties. However, within three weeks of Biden's ascendency to the presidency, the world learnt that the eight months old stand-off between India and China on the Himalaya's celestial heights has ended.

The confrontation between the two most populous countries China and India, both nuclear powers, has ended, which could have triggered off a dangerous conventional war. Even before, these developments could be understood or analyzed, there is a news that Chinese President Xi Jinping may visit India to attend the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) summit later this year.

Amidst these sudden developments, many thinkers and experts may find equations in the world affairs totally changed or realigned. It may be too early to conclude that the power fulcrum in the global politics is expected to be tilted in favour of China, but China has come out unscathed of the accusation of the virus leak and the subsequent trail of deaths across continents. The Chinese initiative appears to have overtaken the possible US strategies to deal with China much before it could be unfolded. The issue, whether the US would be able to retain its only superpower status, is still to be answered in coming months.

The Chinese investments, which were kept on hold during 2020, and its various social media sites too my soon be allowed. It is hoped that the Indian government would soon prepare a proper checking system of the Chinese funds and security protocols for the Chinese software to be used in India. There are number of software like track investors, Huawei or ZTE's 5-G platforms having direct links with PLA. (People's Liberation Army). In India power transmission systems in 41 cities have links with PLA sponsored companies. The 23 contracts, including the state-owned companies, have Chinese equipment. The Chinese can access vital India data through the equipment used by these companies for effective networking. Apart from these direct investments, Chinese proxies have also funded one billion US dollars in Indian start-ups, and 3.9 billion US dollars in Indian unicorns (the unicorns are private limited startups having valuation of US one billion dollars).

INDIA REFUSES TO WINK

There may be debates and discussions regarding the

Chinese decision to end the stand-off. However, the past 12 months will be remembered in the country for bringing the key four elements of the Indian state, bureaucracy, defense, diplomacy and the political leadership on the one-page. They jointly functioned like a country united during a war situation. The common people, who suffered unemployment, business and the illness too realized that it is 'war situation' and the world witnessed unprecedented cooperation among all the sections of the society.

While the Indian forces were facing the PLA eyeball to eyeball on the heights above 10,000 feet, where oxygen becomes much thinnercausing respiratory problems, the Indian scientists developed effective vaccines to tackle the pandemic, Covid-19. During the India-China stand off in the Galwan Valley of Ladakh, the high-level team comprising India's defense minister, Rajnath Singh, and the external affairs minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar,,were negotiating peace with their respective Chinese counterparts despite their aggressive postures.

The 'rude' behavior of Wang Yi, a former diplomat and now the foreign minister of China, had even shocked the Russian president, V. Putin. It goes to the credit of the Russian president that his mild rebukes, if not "displeasure", saved the negotiations. Both sides continued the talks and it finally yielded to peace. Putin's also ignored that the Russian policy towards peace and India would be diluted or influenced under the Chinese offer of buying Russian gas to the tune of 400 billion US dollars.

It is difficult to analyze the impact of the Russian stand for peace, but Putin's stand was much vocal than the USSR's support to India during the 1962 conflict. The available documents reveal that India was made to believe that China would not be for any military solution on the vexed border dispute due to the Chinese takeover of Tibet. The delegation of the Indian Communists was assured by Mao in July 1962 that China had no plan to attack India. Earlier, India's defense minister, Krishna Menon, and Cheng Yi, the then foreign minister of China, had met and decided to restart negotiations. However, the Chinese intentions were revealed in 2012, in document presented by Wu Yongnian, a researcher at the Shanghai Institute of International Affairs. It clearly says that China would not accept the Line of Actual Control (LAC) as settlement of the border dispute. It is in the interest of China to keep the issue alive and penetrate the Indian areas when an opportunity comes.

Therefore, in this context, it is hardly surprising that the Chinese did not furnish details about their decision to withdraw the troops, except an announcement from the PLA on February nine, 2021, that the front line troops of India and China had begun disengaging in a "synchronized and organized" manner from the north and south banks of Pangong, where both sides were pitted against each other for the past several months.

The official sources in New Delhi too kept it a low-key affair. They quietly confided that it was the first step in the long process of disengagement and de-escalation. In fact, the Chinese media suddenly announced ending the standoff with India on the high Himalayas.Thus, the world was informed about this retreat much before the formal announcement of Rajnath Singh on the floor of Parliament.

It is difficult to relate the Chinese withdrawal to Joe Biden's victory as the president of the USA, but Chinese are quite aware of the Biden's "peace overtures" and may not like to continue any confrontation with the USAatleast for the time being.

FAILED BID TO REPEAT 1962 WAR

Within China, there is a strong pro-India lobby. The new generation of China is not aware of any conflict with India. There are scores of Indian businessmen, who have set up their industrial units in China. Earlier, also, some of the senior CPC leaders like Wang Jiaxiang, a graduate of the Sun Yat-Sen University in Moscow, had pleaded before the top Chinese leadership that China must adopt a 'softer policy' towards India, USA and USSR for economic progress of the country. This letter was sent to Zhou-Enlai, the prime minister, on February 27, 1962, but the war mongers in Mao's establishment prevailed upon these party leaders. Mrs. Chang, a senior member of China 's diplomatic mission in New Delhi told this writer that "China committed a 'blunder' in attacking India in 1962;" maybe she was re-echoing the feelings of Wang Jiaxiang.

A document written by Zeng Xyyong, who worked as a councillor at the Chinese Embassy in Delhi, was circulated at the CPC Congress in October 2017, which had extended another five years in office to Xi Jinping and his team. It is a part of a book titled 'Stories of China and India', which was circulated to the media ahead of the party Congress of 2017.

The book provides a rare insight into Chinese assessment of what led Rajiv Gandhi to visit China and his close door meetings with the top Chinese leaders, including Deng Xiaoping. He even suggested that the Chinese leader had suggested the existing McMahon Line be renamed the China-India line. He even asserts that "As a diplomat in the late 1980s, I was witness to a

THE MEETINGS AND OUTCOMES

INDIA'S PRIME MINISTEr, Narendra Modi, and the Chinese strongman, Xi Jinping, have met each other at least 18 times during the past five years, yet the Galwan confrontation took place. It is being asked whether it could not have been avoided. Could China gain any substantial mileage in the world politics or could it claim its superpower status? The unnecessary standoff between the two Asian neighbors has ended for a while, but the trust deficit between India and China may prolong in coming years.

It is being repeatedly stated that the two leaders had repeatedly met, but the Chinese support to the Pakistani terrorists has been "shamelessly" continued with the exercise of its veto in the UNSC.

India has always accepted China's bigger role in the world affairs, but China continues to opposethe much-needed reforms in the UN. It does not want India, South Africa and Brazil should be given permanent seats in the UNSC.

The bilateral issues should be resolved by shedding off the "big brother attitude" towards India. The resolution of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) on the Indo-Tibetan border might usher in much more cooperation between the two sin neighbours.

There is a possibility that India may also join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) , a Chinese sponsored free trade agreement among the Asia-Pacific countries comprising Australia, Brunei, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam. It was signed on November 15, 2020. India as one of the original

India was involved in early discussions but opted out last year over concerns related to cheap Chinese imports. However, being, as one of the original negotiating partners, India can join at any time once the deal comes into effect.

India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi agree to establish a hotline, as both sides stress the importance of 'timely' communication in the wake of last year's border crisis

chance to solve the problem with Prime Minister Rajiv and Deng, who was also a strong man. Deng said, 'We do some compromise on the west wing, you do some on the east wing, then we can have a new border.'

However, Zeng Xyyong's well-meaning observation needs to be relooked, because Xi Jinping has not accepted the solemn assurance of Deng to the world that Hong Kong's democratic institutions and free press would be retained even after it is transferred to China. He had announced one China and two systems. In 2020, the authoritarian Communist system in Hong Kong was enforced much against the wishes of its citizens.

The PLA was in no position to repeat a 1962 on the Indian borders. Indian forces were alert and well prepared to face any eventuality.

DIPLOMACY AND WAR GAMES

There have been more than two dozen meetings between the Chinese and Indian leaders and representatives, including 18 summit meetings between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping during the past five years, but the outcome of these talks has not yielded the desired results. China wanted that India should accept China as a party in the Jammu and Kashmir dispute. In the joint communique

issued after visit of Xi Jinping to India in October 2019, China asked India to restore the Article 370 giving special status to Jammu-Kashmir. It had also tried to push a resolution in the UN Security Council on this issue.

The Chinese duplicity in diplomacy and its art of war can be traced to the ancient board game called wéiqí or Go. It is also known as the game of encirclement, the core philosophy of Chinese military tactics.In wéiqí, the players try to outwit each other by surrounding and capturing the enemy and dominate the board through a series of complex, deceptive moves. Xi Jinping has been playing this game in the domestic politics as well as in the international arena.

It goes to the credit of the Chinese leadership, including the predecessors of Xi Jinping that they used every possible opportunity to augment its military as well as economic power. If Deng could get Hong Kong to China as one of the best deals to obtain western capital as well as technology, Xi Jinping, expanded the Chinese footprints across the continents. He has successfully blended the common notion that the Chinese Army or PLA is invincible with aggressive Chinese postures, but he forgot that India too had helped in projecting this worldwide image for China.

In September 1967, it may be recalled, that as many as 300 Chinese soldiers were wiped out at theNathu La clashes, but India never publicized this victory over PLA. At the GalwanValley clashes too, India did not reveal the number of Chinese casualties. The Indian government as well as media did not publicize that PLA lost more than 100 soldiers, but in a bid to project PLA's invincibility, China is again hiding its exact number of casualties, but the world knows the truth. China has tried to hide the exact figures of its casualties by stating official figures of only four deaths, while India has shared the exact number of her 20 casualties. The world trusts the Indian information.

The Chinese strategy of unconventional warfare in which the opponent gets psyched out even before the first bullet is fired, has failed and it would again lose face if it continues in this game.

MENDING INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS

Within a week of the withdrawal of the PLA troops from the Galwan Valley confrontation site, China has extended its support to hold the BRICKS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) summit. While on February 19, 2021, S. Jaishankar launchd India's BRICS 2021 website at the BRICS Secretariat at Sushma Swaraj Bhawan in New Delhi, Wang Wenbin, China's Foreign Ministry spokesman, announced his country's support to India in holding the BRICS summit. He told journalists, "We support India in hosting this year's BRICS meetings and stand ready to work together with it and other members to strengthen communication and cooperation in various fields, advance the three-pillar-driven cooperation in economic, political and cultural sectors".

"Xi Jinping might visit India later this year for the BRICS summit, if the coronavirus situation improves", he asserted.

The theme of the summit will be to expand, 'BRICS Plus' cooperation to realise sustained progress in BRICS cooperation and to contribute to the international community's efforts to defeat COVID-19, resume economic growth and improve global governance", he further added and reiterated the Chinese commitment to consolidating BRICS strategic partnership and the positive momentum in BRICS

INDIA ALWAYS PROTECTS CHINESE INTERESTS

THE GALWAN clash with the PLA has enabled the'special forces' of the Indian army to end the psychological mileage China might have expected from the standoff. Most of the strategic and foreign affairs expert believe that the unnecessary avoidable confrontation has not given any substantial gain to the Chinese leadership.

During the 8th century, when Tibet's aggressive forces were poised to capture most of the territories of South China, the Tang dynasty had sought the military support of Narasimhavarman-II. The Tamil warrior was appointed the general of the South China, who saved the China's Tang dynasty.

The history of the India-China cooperation needs to be revisited to end the unnecessary clashes between the two countries. There were regular exchanges of finished goods between the two countries during the reigns of Rajendra Chola-I (AD1014-1044) and Kulothunaga Chola-I(AD 1070-1122). Cholas had sent ambassadors to the Court of China and Merchants from Tamizhagam traded in Chinese goods.

solidarity and cooperation.

It is yet to be assessed, whether the proposed meeting will enable India and China to resume their normal ties and cooperation.

With the acquisition of technologies, China has evolved its academia to undertake massive research work in almost all the fields of science and technology. Its investments in artificial intelligence, both in terms of manpower and capital, sre now ready to give it spectacular dividends. During the past ten years, the Chinese journals have published highest numbers of research documents. It has not only hired Indian researchers and scientists, who could not get jobs due to the bureaucratic apathy in India, have engaged academia of the prestigious universities of USA and Britain. Thus, China is now poised to develop high technologies with its own resources. The US-led western powers do not appear to be serious to contain china's ambitions. They have allowed China to access its vast capital markets and technologies. China was allowed membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) with a hope that it would also adopt democratic systems in the government. Hong Kong was handed over to China with a promise that it would allow its democratic system to be retained for next 50 years. However, the promise was violated in 2020. The much trumpeted one nation and two systems were finally ended. Hong Kong's free press has been subjugated and the representative democratic system has now been replaced by the authoritarian communist regime.

The Chinese penetration is quite deep in their systems that it is almost impossible to take up any strong stance against China.

CHINESE STRATEGY

The contemporary world is aware of a place, Wuhan in the mainland China, as the source of the Corona Virus. It is widely believed that this manmade virus, maybe, a part of a future biological weapon development, was leaked from a facility at Wuhan. Interestingly, this bio-technology laboratory was set up with the help of the French and had received liberal financial assistance from various financial and tech giants of US and Europe. Within a few years, it became one of the high security zones, almost inaccessible to outsiders. A few Indian scientists, who had been to Wuhan, told this author that the research works being done here has always been wrapped in mystery. The laboratory functions under the direct supervision of the highest Chinese authorities.

China expresses its support for India, which has assumed the BRICS Chairmanship for 2021, in hosting the bloc's summit this year's and says it will work with New Delhi to strengthen the cooperation among the five-member grouping

With the refusal of the Chinese authorities to allow any investigation regarding the leak, the suspicion of the Chinese 'mischief' cannot be ruled out. Even the

THE FUSION OF THE RICH CULTURAL TIES

THE POLITICAL ambitions of some Chinese leaders had undermined the 3,000-year-old cultural ties between India and China. During different periods, their relationships flourished and contributed to the welfare of the people. During ancient times, the Indian traders had set up a temple of Lord Shiva in China. The Buddhism flourished in China during the first to the sixth century. It was an era of material and spiritual exchanges and the entry of Buddhism into China.

The Buddhism reached China from two different routes; when the western Region was disrupted, the south sea route was available. During the early period of the first and second centuries, the king of Kanchi had sent a rhinoceros to China, in the year 59, the King of Gandhara sent a white elephant, and in the year 87, the Kushan King offered lions. In the lst century CE, China built its first Buddhist temple,

World Health Organization (WHO) team has been refused to probe the virus leak. The data available till the January 2021 estimates that the spell of this deadly virus has already caused deaths of more than 2.4 million people across the world. Even in the USA, despite its highly developed health services, according to available records, about half-a-million patients have succumbed. India too has suffered 156-thousand deaths.

This virus attack has had a surprise element. Even in Wuhan, a few weeks before this fatal leak, the 2019 Military World Games in the month of October were hosted. Within a few weeks after the event, the world was stormed with this unprecedented, "biological weapon" across the continents. The Jinping's "torch of peace" was replaced by an aggressive posture of the Chinese troops from the South China Sea to the Galwan Valley in Ladakh on the Indo-Tibetan border.

THE SHIFT IN POWER BALANCE

In this context, India's foreign minister, S. Jaishankar's recently published book, "The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World" offers a unique insight to the country's policy makers, political establishment and academia that how to steer the country's interests during the difficult uncertain times ahead. He raises three issues, which are adversely affecting the country's initiative in the field of strategic and foreign affairs; firstly, one is 1947 partition of India, which gave China much bigger space, secondly, India delayed economic reforms by 15 years and thirdly, prolonged exercise of nuclear option.

There have been as many as eight review conferences about the supervision of these biological dual-use materials, but neither China nor USA has signed the final documents ratifying these international accords. The convention on the prohibition of the development, production and stockpiling of bacteriological (biological) and toxin weapons and on their destruction commonly known as the biological convention (BWC) or biological and toxin weapons convention (BTWC), had taken place in1972 and enforced in1975.

It was for the first time multilateral disarmament treaty banning an entire category of biological weapons was ratified at the UN level. It also stated that "never in any circumstances to develop, produce, stockpile or otherwise acquire or retain microbial or other biological agents, or toxins whatever their origin or method of production, of types and in quantities that have no justification for prophylactic, protective or other peaceful purposes.

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i.e. White Horse Temple and the first sutras were translated into Chinese.

Both sides now had a better knowledge of each other. However, the most prominent feature of this period was the large-scale eastward movement of Buddhism which was associated with a great number of Indian monks coming to China to preach.

The Indian monks introduced astronomy, metallurgy and medicine in China. An eminent monk, Yu Fakai "was a follower of Jivaka and a master of medical skill" and also good at acupuncture. He was the earliest one to combine traditional Chinese medicine with Indian medicine.

The Indian monks, musicians and painters had promoted the Chinese art of paintings and various dance forms and music.

The Buddhist music too have had Indian roots. During the first half of the 7th century CE, Songtsan Gampo (617-650 CE) unified the greater part of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and founded the Tubo Kingdom with Lhasa at the center.

He successively married the Princess Bhrukuti of Nepal and the Princess Wencheng of the Tang Dynasty and built Buddhist temples for them. In 755 CE, the young Trisong Detsen (742-797 CE) succeeded to the throne. When he grew up, he began to believe in Buddhism, inviting Santaraksita and Padmasambhava from India to spread the message of Buddha.

₹27,598cr allocated for new schemes in the big UP budget

Yogi Adityanath says the first "paperless" Budget in the pandemic year, presented by Finance Minister Suresh Khanna in the Assembly, represents "atmanirbhar (self-reliant) Uttar Pradesh", reports **MUDIT MATHUR**

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath-led BJP government in Uttar Pradesh has projected biggest ever ₹5.5 trillion crore populist paperless budget for 2021-22 with announcement of many populist welfare schemes in view of upcoming assembly elections early next year. Budget reflected commitment for its core agenda of promoting religious tourism infrastructure with an aim to develop Ayodhya — the birthplace of Lord Ram – as a capital of cultural nationalism.

The Bharatiya Janata Party is heading for its toughest challenge in 2022 as it has to confront with the problem of mass unemployment compounded by migrant workers crisis due to impact of Covid-19 pandemic that actually adversely reflected in substantial shortfall in revenue collections. However, the state government was successful in maintaining fiscal deficit at 4.17 percent of state gross domestic product (SGDP) as against allowed statutory limit of 4.5 percent. The projections for the current fiscal 2020-21 of state's own tax revenue target was ₹1, 66 lakh crore but collections are estimated to be short by 41,154 crore at 1,24 lakh crore.

On tax collection during 2021-22, the finance minister Suresh Khanna said a target of 1,04,385 crore had been set for GST, 41,500 crore from excise, 25,500 crore from stamps and registration and 9,350 crore from road tax. Though the government has not restored the Vidhyak Nidhi (MLA Local Area Development Fund) suspended in April last year after the COVID- 19 outbreak, the government has proposed to provide 1,512 crore for development works to be taken up on the recommendation of the 402 MLAs of the UP Assembly during 2021-22.

Pitching high the tone of popular election plunk, "Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas," the budget attempts with many populist welfare measures to pacify agitated farmers whose continuing outrageous protests against three farm laws on the peripheries of National Capital Region (NCR) and western Uttar Pradesh remain a cause of deep concern to address. The government announced new schemes in various sectors amounting to ₹27,598.40 crore in the budget.

The government promises the youth, women, poor and farmers in its budget to bring tap water, electricity, roads, irrigate agriculture fields and provide basic amenities to every household, as well as make every village digital. The budget claimed at ushering in composite development and self-reliance of the state. The UP assembly elections are due in early 2022.

Farmers' welfare

In view of doubling farmers' income by the year 2022, an outlay of ₹100 crore proposed for "Atma Nirbhar Krishak Samanvit Vikas Yojana" in the year 2021-22. ₹600 crore proposed for the "Mukhyamantri Krishak Durghatna Kalyan Yojana". A provision of ₹700 crore for the free water facility to farmers. ₹400 crore to providing crop loan to farmers at concessional rates. The government fixed the target of setting up of 15 thousand solar pumps in the financial year 2021-22 for improving irrigation facilities.

Healthcare initiatives

The Covid-19 pandemic put the health care on the top priorities of the government. In order to improve the health infrastructure in the state, Yogi announced its ambitious scheme "Health for all" and

made several budgetary provisions for strengthening the health infrastructure with the latest technology for treatment. The vaccination drive is already underway in UP and the state is about to enter its third phase. The government, in its budget, has made a budgetary provision of ₹50 crore for the vaccination scheme for prevention of COVID-19.

The government allocated ₹5,395 crore in the budget for revitalizing the National Rural Health Mission for spreading health facilities in rural areas. Other budgetary provisions include ₹1,300 crore for "Ayushman Bharat" Scheme, ₹142 crore for "Ayushman Bharat" — Chief Minister's "Jan Arogya Yojana," ₹320 crore for "Pradhan Mantri Matrava Vandana Yojana" and ₹1,073 crore to create diagnostic infrastructure at primary health care facilities.

In addition to this, a budgetary provision of ₹425 is proposed for urban health and "Arogya" centres and ₹54 crore for strengthening the state drug control system. Besides, a budget of ₹50 crore has been earmarked for the construction of food and drug laboratories' divisional offices in 12 divisions of the state. A budgetary provision of ₹77 crore is proposed for establishment public health units at the block level.

A total of ₹140 crore will be provided for the all-round development of the city of Ayodhya including the development of Suryakund in Ayodhya. The name of the airport under construction in the district Ayodhya will be Maryada Purushottam Shriram Airport Ayodhya and a provision of ₹101 crore is proposed for it.

Medical education

The budget provides ₹1950 crore to complete under- construction medical colleges in 13 districts as a part of chief minister's commitment. These medical colleges are coming up in Bijnor, Kushinagar, Sultanpur, Gonda, Lakhimpur Kheri, Lalitpur, Chandauli, Bulandshahr, Sonbhadra, Pilibhit, Auraiya, Kanpur Dehat and Kaushambi districts of the state. These medical colleges will start MBBS courses in the academic year 2021-22.

Besides, ₹48 crore has been allocated for the operation of medical colleges in the public-private partnership (PPP) mode in 16 districts of the state. A sum of ₹23 crore has been earmarked for National Health Digital Mission as well as ₹960 crore for under-construction medical colleges at Etah, Hardoi, Pratapgarh, Fatehpur, Siddharthnagar, Deoria, Ghazipur and Mirzapur. Besides it provided ₹175 crore for establishing new medical colleges at Amethi and Balrampur and ₹100 crore for Atal Behari Vajpayee Medical University in Lucknow.

A Biosafety Level-4 laboratory under the Institute of Virology and Infectious Diseases in Lucknow will also be set up. Three diabetic retinopathy treatment centers would be set up in King George's Medical University (KGMU), Lucknow, government medical colleges in Prayagraj and Meerut. Advanced diabetes centre would be set up at Sanjay Gandhi Postgraduate Institute of Medical Sciences (SGPGI), Lucknow. Besides, there is a proposal to strengthen two government medicine-manufacturing units at Lucknow and Pilibhit to supply quality medicines to Ayurvedic and Unani hospitals in the state.

Rural development

The budget proposals include ₹7,000 crore under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Gramin) and ₹369 crore has been made under the Mukhyamantri Awas Yojana (Gramin). A provision of ₹5,548 crore under Rashtriya Gramin Rojgar Guarantee Yojana to create 35 crore man days employment. Under Batch-1 of Pradhanmantri Gram Sadak Yojana-3, a budget

UP BUDGET TAKES CARE OF COMPOSITE DEVELOPMENT, SAYS YOGI

Terming it an all-inclusive budget, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has claimed that the UP annual budget of 2021-22 represent sentiments of 24 crore people of the state. "The Budget was aimed at ushering in composite development and self-reliance of the state," he added.

The chief minister said, "the budget was a true reflection of Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas and Sabka Vishwas and would become a medium to give new hope, new energy and new possibilities of development in the state during the Covid period."

Soon after tabling of budget in the state assembly by finance minister Suresh Khanna, the chief minister Yogi Adityanath shared his impressions with the media. "the first budget of the Bharatiya Janata Party government of 2017-18 was farmer-oriented budget (referring to farm loan waiver), the 2018-19 budget focused on industrial development, the 2019-20 budget focused on women welfare, the 2020-21 budget on youth welfare and entrepreneurship development and the latest 2021-22 budget was all-inclusive with focus on empowerment of the different communities and deprived sections of society."

The chief minister said, "the budget reaffirmed the resolve of the government to provide tap water in each household, electricity supply to every house, water to every farm and work to every hand." "Not only this, efforts like connecting rural areas with banking facilities through village secretariat, common service centre, banking correspondent Sakhi in every village, employing women in community toilets, will give a new dimension to women empowerment and self-reliance and making villages digital," he showcased.

The chief minister said that the budget would expedite the efforts towards all-inclusive and integrated development of various sections while realising the concept of 'Ease of Living' and 'Self-reliant Uttar Pradesh' on the ground. He said the budget size of 2021-22 was 7.3 per cent more than the budget of 2020-21 fiscal. He said despite the shortfall in revenue collection due to the Covid pandemic, the fiscal deficit was estimated to be 4.1 per cent under FRBM (fiscal responsibility and budget management) Act.

Yogi lauded the provision for including farmers' families and 'bataidar' (sharecropper) in the Kisan Accident Insurance Scheme. Similarly, he said, it provided social security to about one crore labourers in the unorganised sector. He said each worker of the unorganised sector would be registered and provided a social security cover of 2 lakh.

Yogi Adityanath said the Mukhyamantri Saksham Suposhan Yojana for anemic children, establishment of Sainik Schools and state universities in each division, constructing medical colleges under the P-PP Model in unserved districts, setting up of law university in Prayagraj, extension of Jal Jeevan Mission to all the districts, development of road connectivity in rural areas, new-policies in the aviation sector, including international airports in Ayodhya and Kushinagar, development of destitute 'gauvansh' in collaboration with NGOs at panchayat level and proposal for establishment of tribal museum in Lucknow, were the most thoughtful schemes which promised to take the state to new heights.

The chief minister also referred to the enthusiasm of the youth and parents towards the newly-launched Chief Minister Abhyudaya Yojana for the youth appearing in competitive examinations like civil services, NEET, JEE. He termed the proposal to provide tablets to youths under the scheme as very useful and said that a large number of youth would be benefited from it.

provision of ₹5,000 crore is proposed.

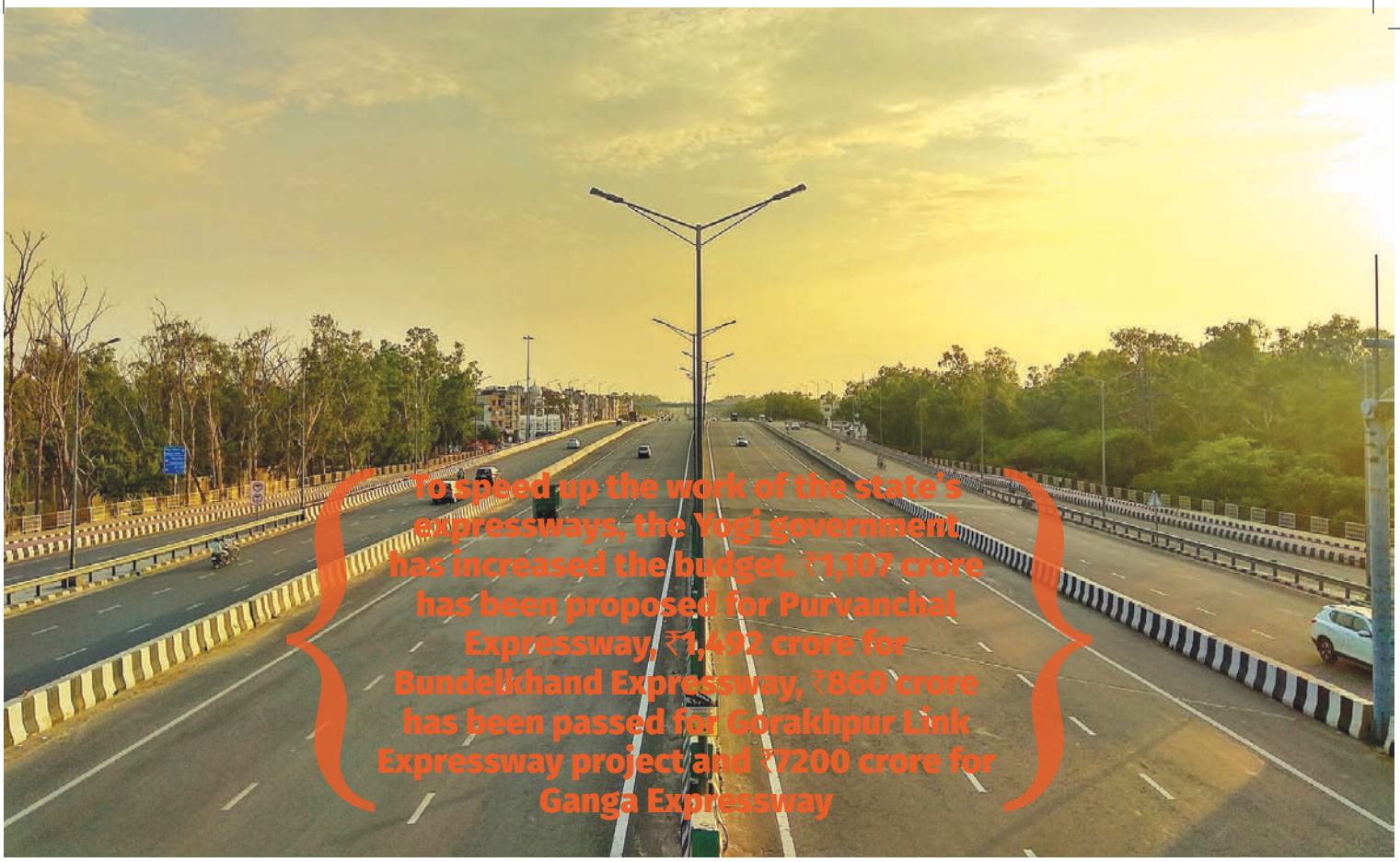
Women welfare

The Yogi government, acting on the much publicised policies of empowerment of women, made allocation of ₹1200 crore for implementation of "Mukhyamantri Kanya Sumangala Yojana" after removing its shortcomings. ₹100 crore allocated to meet the solution of malnutrition problem of the women and children in the year 2021-22 under "Mukhyamantri Saksham Suraksha Yojana." A provision of ₹4094 crore for Nutritional Programme and ₹415 crore for National Nutrition Campaign has also been made. Besides allocation of ₹200 crore for introducing a new scheme named "Mahila Samarthya Yojana" during the financial year 2021- 2022. ₹32 crore to be provided for establishing "Mahila Shakti Kendras."

ODOP plan

For promoting entrepreneurship spirit in youth and with its focus on all-round development of the state a budgetary provision of ₹250 crore has been made for the flagship ODOP (One District One Product) scheme. To provide skill development and impart training to the traditional artisans of urban and rural areas and to keep them updated with the latest technology, the government had earlier launched the Vishwakarma Shram Samman Yojana. In this regard, a budgetary provision of ₹30 crore has been proposed by the government. Similarly, to promote the art of clay artisans of the state, a budget of ₹10 crore has been proposed for the Mati Kala Board. Also, a budgetary provision of ₹100 crore has been made for the Chief Minister Youth Self-Employment Scheme. Under the Chief Minister Gramodyog Rojgar Yojana, interest-free loans up to ₹10 lakh for general women and reserved category beneficiaries and on 4 per cent annual interest for male beneficiaries of general category, are targeted to be made available through banks.

The government has also taken the decision to revive the closed spinning mills of UP State Spinning Company and set up industrial parks/locations/clusters under the PPP model. For this, a provision of ₹100 crore has been proposed in



To speed up the work of the state's expressways, the Yogi government has increased the budget. ₹1,107 crore has been proposed for Purvanchal Expressway, ₹1,492 crore for Bundelkhand Expressway, ₹860 crore has been passed for Gorakhpur Link Expressway project and ₹7200 crore for Ganga Expressway

OPPOSITION PARTIES SHOW DISAPPOINTMENT

All the major opposition parties felt disappointed over the last budget of Yogi led BJP government, including Congress, Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, Aam Admi Party and CPM who criticised its priorities.

"UP Budget 2021 is paperless and the government is senseless," comented Uttar Pradesh Congress Committee (UPCC) president Ajay Kumar Lallu while reacting to the budget. "The budget had nothing for the small businessmen, farmers, growing unemployment, rising inflation," he remarked. Congress party also took out a cycle march to attract attention to rising fuel prices and demanded to cut the petroleum prices, LPG rates and rising inflation.

Taking a jibe at the last budget of the ruling BJP headed by Yogi Adityanath, Samajwadi Party resident Akhilesh Yadav said "khel khatam, paisa hajam. "The budget gives no hope to the unemployed youth and they will remain jobless. It had nothing for the poor, unemployed people and farmers, and gave benefits to only industrialists. This government will not spare us. If this government does not belong to Mother Ganga, what will happen to us?" He sarcastically remarked. "This was the fifth and the last budget of the Yogi Adityanath government. After this, he would not be able to get this opportunity even if wanting it," he added.

Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati, In a series of tweets, criticised the budget presented by the Yogi Adityanath government in Uttar Pradesh and said, "The budget presented by the BJP government is extremely disappointing, especially in terms of ending the cruelty of unemployment in the state, like the Central government. An attempt has been made to show promises and beautiful dreams to the public in the UP budget like that of the Union government."

Reacting to the budget, Aam Aadmi Party leader Sanjay Singh said it lacked the truth. He said the Yogi government's Rs 5.50 lakh crore budget did not have any space for needy people. AAP's state president Sabhajeet Singh made a similar reaction and said the budget was a publicity stunt with an aim on election.

"There is nothing for the farmers, unemployed youth and women. It is just betrayal of the people of the state in the name of Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas," said Rashtriya Lok Dal national spokesperson Anupam Mishra. "The UP budget was very disappointing and one had not expected this type of budget as it did not meet the expectations of the poor and the farmers. It was nothing but a bundle of promises," he remarked.

Communist Party of India (Marxists) state secretary Heera Lal Yadav demanded roll back of the hike in fuel prices. Criticising the budget, Communist Party of India (Marxists-Leninists) state secretary Sudhakar Yadav said the budget was 'kagzi' (paperless) in real terms. He said the budget would neither lower the back breaking inflation nor would it set up industries for jobs.

Uttar Pradesh's budget for 2021-22 fiscal.

Schemes for minorities

The welfare of minorities schemes got budgetary support of 829 crore for providing scholarships to students of the minority communities, For the minority community-dominated population, a provision of 588 crore has been made under multi-sectorial development plan for provision of basic amenities like health, education and drinking water.

Industrial development

Excellent connectivity with rapid transport network server as backbone for industrial development creating job avenues. The Budget provisions of ₹1107 crore for Purvanchal Express-way Project, ₹1492 crore for Bundelkhand Express-way Project and of ₹860 crore for Gorakhpur Link Express-way Project have been made. Besides provision of ₹ 7,200 crore for land acquisition under Ganga Express-way Project and ₹489 crore for ongoing construction work has also been allocated. The express-way will connect Meerut with Prayagraj. Apart from this, it will also connect Hapur, Bulandshahr, Amroha, Sambhal, Budaun, Shahjahanpur, Hardoi, Unnao, Rae Bareli, and Pratapgarh. In future, this six-lane expressway will be extended to eight lanes.

Economic hub

Asia's largest Noida International Greenfield Airport is coming up in Jewar of western Uttar Pradesh adjoining Noida has emerging as revolutionary hub for economic activities with supporting backbone infrastructures in the vicinity of dedicated corridors connecting various states across the country. UP budget made strategic allocation of ₹2000 crore for increasing number of runways from two to six. The under-construction Airport in Ayodhya would be named as Maryada Purushottam Sri Ram Airport and provided with ₹100 crore. Now UP has six active airports from where regional connectivity air services with state's capital has to be started.

Metro rail projects

The budget provisions of ₹597 crore and ₹478 crore have been made for Kanpur and Agra metros, respectively. A provision of ₹100 crore has been made for Metro projects of Varanasi, Gorakhpur and other districts. In addition, a provision of ₹1,326 core has been made for the Delhi-Ghaziabad-Meerut Rapid Road Transport System.

Road network

The Uttar Pradesh budget aims to strengthen the road network in the state. There is an allocation ₹12,441 crore for the construction of new roads and bridges. The government has made provisions in the budget of the Public Work Department (PWD) keeping in mind the connectivity of villages with roads and connectivity in rural areas. In its fifth budget, the government has made an allocation of ₹4,135 crore for the maintenance of roads and bridges.

The approved cost of the Kanpur Metro Rail project is ₹11,076 crore. A provision of ₹597 crore is proposed for the project in the budget of the financial year 2021-2022. A total of ₹1,326 crore has been given for Delhi-Meerut RRTS, while ₹100 crore each have been proposed for Gorakhpur-Varanasi Metro

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Will asset monetisation plan pay off?

There are challenges to generating revenues through sale of surplus land held by govt and PSUs, writes **MY SIDDIQUI**

The Union Government's proposal to monetise some vital public assets to reduce its public debt and to enhance infrastructural development for faster growth of the nation, as announced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in the Budget 2021-22 in Parliament on February 1, 2021, is difficult to implement in view of the resistance from the States as land comes in the State List of the Constitution of India and without their concurrence and sharing the proceeds from monetisation with them (State concerned) Central Government will find it impossible to monetise impugned assets with it.

The Budget 2021-22 has proposed a national monetisation of potential brownfield projects involving transfer of five operational roads to the InvIT of National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) worth rupees 5000 crore, shift rupees 7000 crore transmission assets to PowerGrid's InvIT. Other similar plan includes monetisation of upcoming Railways Dedicated Freight Corridor (DFC) assets, operating toll roads of NHAI, oil and gas pipeline of Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Gas Authority of India (GAIL), warehousing assets of Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) and Airport Authority of India (AAI's) airports in tire 2 and tire 3 cities.

According to official sources, proposed monetisation of public assets is intended to convert unutilized public assets into economic value and garner financial resources for modernization and upgradation of the concerned public assets for efficient utilization of such unutilized or sub optimally utilised assets. Process of monetisation will involve parternership with private investors, wherein government's input will include unutilized or surplus land and its economic utilization by private investors may be in the denomination of 50:50 sharing of their proceeds/ profits. The government to oversee workings and implementation of monetisation policy is working out institutional framework for such policy implementation. Other gains, according to the government, will help fund the national infrastructure to cut pressure on the exchequer and the taxpayers. This process will be completed in five years and NHAI intends to raise rupees 1 trillion from demonetisation of its assets.

Process of monetisation of public assets was initiated first in 1993 following the globalization of Indian economy having been set in motion by Narasimha Rao Government in July 1991, where Ministries of Defence, Railways, Surface Transport since redesignated Highways, Transport and Shipping, Communications and Urban Affairs had undertaken exercise for monetisation of parts of their unutilized, non-utilised and surplus land assets. But it came a cropper following resistance of the State Governments in view of the fact that Land is a State Subject in the Constitution of India and the Union Government and its public sector undertakings (PSUs) buy land from the State Governments for which after the sales deeds the Centre pays rentals to the States. States wanted pie in the reuse of such lands for development in the concerned areas. Government of India would insist that the proceeds of monetisation will go to national kitty for overall country's development. Added to that the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) put spanner in several of such proposed monetisation scheme on the ground of breaching national security and the matter stuck there.

However, the proposal of monetisation of strategic defence cantonment land, strategic major port land and air space on railways was put in cold storage on security grounds at the instance of MHA. A restaurant on rooftop (air space) of Church Gate Station in Mumbai, started by then Railway Minister Madhavrao Scindia in 1986 by a private restaurateur that had a roaring business and earned crores of rupees in profits to the Railways, was dismantled after three years following advice of the MHA.

The Ministry of Railways, however, monetised part of its unutilized land in Mumbai and Ministry of Surface Transport part of similar strategic land of Calcutta Port. Thereafter, there has been no progress in the monetisation drive in the Union Government although Ministry of Railways went ahead and set up the Railways Land Development Authority and the matter is stuck there itself. One does not know how the government will go ahead and implement the proposal.

Railways have 47,000 hectares of sub-optimally used/ unutilised/surplus land and idle airspace. Its monetisation can go ahead within the frame of its futuristic requirements of expansion, upgradation and modernization. So the decision of the Centre to tread the most intricate path of mega monetisation of some of its assets to mobilise additional resources is most challenging. The government will have to navigate very difficult tasks before the proposal fructifies!

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Fireworks likely during Haryana budget session

Riding high on the farmers' protest, the main opposition party Congress is set to bring no-confidence motion against the ruling BJP-JJP government, reports **RAJESH MOUDGIL**

The upcoming budget session of Haryana vidhan sabha — which begins from March 5 — is all set to witness heavy fireworks with the Congress deciding to bring no confidence motion against the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Jannayak Janta Party (JJP) coalition government.

Though there are 90 members in the state assembly, the present strength of the House stands at 88 as the sole Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) MLA Abhay Chautala has resigned to register his protest against farm laws and a Congress' Kalka MLA Pardeep Chaudhary has been disqualified after being convicted in a case by a Himachal Pradesh court.

While the ruling BJP has 40 members in the House, its ally JJP has 10 MLAs, Congress, 30 and Haryana Lokhit Party (HLP), one, besides seven independent MLAs. Importantly enough, there are a handful of MLAs from among JJP and independent legislators who have been vocal against the government over the issue of farm laws.

However, the biggest attack would come from the main opposition party Congress which has been simmering with anger against the ruling government over the issue of farmers' stir against the contentious farm laws besides other issues like deteriorating law and order situation, at least 47 deaths due to spurious liquor in three districts of the state and the alleged liquor smuggling at a large scale.

Led by former chief minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda, all the 29 Congress MLAs have even taken out march to Raj Bhawan demanding that a special session of the assembly. They have also decided that they would bring no confidence motion against the government.

Hooda has said that since the BJP-JJP coalition government has lost confidence of the public, Congress would bring the no-confidence motion against the government in this coming session.

He has told newspersons that the voices of dissent are also being heard among the MLAs who are supporting the government. They are constantly making statements against the government and in support of the farmers. The no-confidence motion will let people know which MLA stands with the government and which MLA stands with the people.

Referring to the ongoing farmers protests, Hooda lashes out at the contentious farm laws stating that the farmers' protest had now turn into a people's movement as these three agricultural laws were not only anti-farmer but would also cause loss to the common consumers as the laws would also lead to the increase in the prices of various products.

However, reacting to the Congress' move to bring the no confidence motion, the assembly speaker Gian Chand Gupta told newspersons that such a motion could be moved with support of at least 18 MLAs. Subsequent to this the House would hold discussion on the same before taking a decision on the same.

It is exactly what the Congress would like to happen as it would be during the discussion, it would bring proposal for rejecting all three agricultural laws and also bring minimum support price (MSP) guarantee amendment bill. The Congress leaders say that this legislation would also ensure that if anyone would buy farm produces at less than the MSP, he would face legal action.

Other issues with which the congress would take on the government include deteriorating law and order situation, liquor smuggling and at least 47 deaths due to spurious liquor in three districts — Sonepat, Panipat and Faridabad.

The Congress MLAs say that the law and order situation had been deteriorating like never before in the state with murders being a commonplace now. Referring to the several recent incidents of killings including the murder of five persons in Rohtak by a wrestling coach, they say that in most of the cases it was found that illegal firearms were used.

The Congress leaders' further point out that state's deaths due to spurious liquor was another issue which they would highlight to take on the government. It may be recalled that it was subsequent to 47 deaths due to the spurious liquor in Panipat, Sonepat and

Faridabad, that the state government was compelled to constitute a special investigation team (SIT) findings of which would reportedly an embarrassment for the government.

Ironically, the SIT findings have also brought differences between the state excise and taxation department headed by JJP leader Dushyant Chautala, who is deputy chief minister and the home department headed by Anil Vij.

It is the third time that the government has been embarrassed over the issue of illicit liquor. While the deaths due to spurious liquor is besides the illegal liquor scam was unearthed during the lockdown and the liquor smuggling at a large scale. The issue pertaining to the smuggling of Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL) to other states has also raised furore.

Besides, the opposition is also all set to take on the treasury benches over the issue pertaining to allegedly fraudulent land registries in several districts of the state.

The Congress may also highlight the haste with which its MLA from Kalka Pardeep Chaudhary was disqualified from the assembly after he was convicted and sentenced to three-year imprisonment in a case of rioting in Solan.

On move to bring the no-confidence motion, Assembly Speaker Gian Chand Gupta says such a motion may be moved with support of at least 18 MLAs. Subsequent to this the House will hold discussion before taking a decision on the same. Congress, meanwhile, is all set to bring proposal for rejecting all three agri laws and also bring MSP guarantee amendment bill

The home minister Anil Vij, however, maintains that the government is ready to face the issues raised by the opposition benches. He says that unlike the Congress and other governments which allegedly hushed up the irregularities and corrupt practices, the present government was committed to eliminate corruption in the system.

It is with this intention that the present government had itself initiated inquiries or formed SITs to reach the root of the alleged irregularities, he says and adds that the guilty would not be spared. Vij like almost all the ministers also pooh-poohs the Congress' move to bring no confidence motion maintaining that there was no threat to the government which, he adds, has been well-saddled with full majority.

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Development Council in focus in the Valley

DDCs take centre stage in J&K as Assembly polls and statehood remain uncertain, reports **RIYAZ WANI**

The People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration, a grouping of Kashmiri parties seeking restoration of J&K autonomy, won 110 out of 280 seats in the recently held District Development Council elections. This made it a favourite to gain power in 12 districts. But it ended up controlling just eight districts - five in Kashmir Valley and three in Jammu.

On the other hand, the BJP won the posts of chairpersons in six districts, the BJP allied Apni Party in two and the People's Conference in one. The other three districts were won by the independent candidates.

Among the PAGD's eight seats, the NC candidates won six and the PDP and the Communist Party won one each.

Each district has 14 seats and the party or alliance with majority of the seats controlled the district. But this is not how it worked on the ground. For example, In Srinagar and Shopian districts in Kashmir where Apni Party won chairperson posts, it had just three and two members respectively. The party was accused of forging a majority through horse-trading and poaching of the other councillors.

In case of Shopian, the NC leader and former J&K Chief Minister Omar Abdullah said in a press conference that one of the candidates who joined the Apni Party had contested the election on its symbol. Omar blamed the administration for forcing independent candidates to join Apni Party.

But the NC can take heart from the

fact that it has chairpersons in six districts — albeit, they are supposed to be the PAGD candidates. But the PDP that won around 30 seats in the election got just one chairperson along with one by the CPI(M) — also a constituent of the PAGD - which won just five.

Congress has been the biggest loser. It controls no district despite winning 26 seats. It, however, managed to win the vice-chairperson posts in Kishtwar and Rajouri districts with the support of the PAGD.

This is a sad turn of events for a party that was a major political player in J&K before 2014. It was a part of the two successive governments, one with the PDP and another with the NC. It won just 12 seats in 2014 Assembly, ironically all of them in Kashmir Valley. Going forward, it looks unlikely that the party can improve its tally in future elections unless it does something remarkably different.

BJP dilemma

As for the BJP, it too has reasons to worry. The DDC elections showed its winning percentage in Jammu has come down from 67 in 2014 elections when it won 25 of 37 seats in the region to 60 in the DDC polls. The party won largely in Hindu dominated areas of Jammu. They are Reasi, Kathua, Samba, Jammu, Udhampur and Doda. And for the BJP to continue performing well in future elections, it will always need the Hindu vote to consolidate in its favour. But this won't guarantee it a majority in the Assembly. The party would need the support of the other parties, more so, those with a base in Kashmir to form or be a part of the J&K government.

In fact, the senior BJP leader and former J&K Deputy Chief Minister Kavinder Gupta recently highlighted the need for the BJP to scout for the partners in a future coalition government in the union territory.

"The BJP may not form the government on its own but will definitely form the government with like-minded people," he said.

And these like-minded people currently are leaders of the Apni Party who toe the line of the saffron party in Kashmir Valley. But given its political standing, the Apni Party is unlikely to do well electorally in the Valley. At least not to the extent that will be helpful to the BJP to muster a majority.

This leaves the BJP once again dependent on the NC, the PDP and for that matter, the PC to form a future J&K government. But given the anti-BJP posture of these parties and their pursuit of the restoration of J&K autonomy, they are unlikely to ally with the BJP. As for Sajad Lone led PC, which recently parted ways with the PAGD, it will be premature to conclude how the party will respond to the BJP overtures in future. But Lone too is not an influential political player in the Valley. So far, his maximum seat count in any Assembly election is two seats.

Congress remains the biggest loser as it controls no district despite winning 26 seats. It, however, manages to win the vice-chairperson posts in Kishtwar and Rajouri with PAGD support

Delimitation exercise

The delimitation exercise is due to change the electoral game in the Valley. The delimitation commission set up by the government is likely to enhances the seats for Jammu making it politically at par with Kashmir.

If that happens, a Jammu based party like the BJP will have more political weight in the future J&K Assembly. And even if a Kashmir based party were to form or lead a future government, it will have little maneuvering space to carry out its agenda or overturn many of the laws passed by the New Delhi backed administration over the past two years.

This is why Kashmir based parties are sceptical of the commission and have refused to join it. On February 18 when the Delimitation Commission for J&K held its first meeting to seek suggestion on the process of delimitation in the union territory, the other three associated members of the commission - National Conference leaders Farooq Abdullah, Mohammad Akbar Lone, Hasnain Masoodi — didn't attend. They had already informed Delimitation Commission chairperson Justice (Retd) Ranjana Prakash Desai in a letter about their inability to attend the meeting.

"In our view, the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019 is palpably unconstitutional and has been enacted in disregard and violation of mandate and spirit of the Constitution of India and therefore not to be acted upon," the MPs said in the letter.

This has created difficulty for the UT government. The Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha has asked the regional parties that the early Assembly elections were not possible in case they didn't co-operate with the delimitation commission.

"Those demanding early Assembly polls in J&K must help and cooperate with the delimitation commission so that the process is completed and Assembly polls are held in the UT," Sinha said.

But it is unlikely that the NC will co-operate with the commission it considers illegal and sees as geared to undermine the hitherto dominant role of Kashmir Valley in government formation. At the same time, the BJP has so far shown little inclination to restore the statehood to J&K. Responding to this demand from the opposition in recent parliament session, the home minister Amit Shah said the statehood will be restored at an appropriate time.

Meanwhile, the DDCs are all that J&K has in terms of democracy. But their function is strictly developmental in nature. They have no political role.

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Congress sweeps Punjab bypolls

Congress records stunning victory in civic bodies' polls in the state, Oppn parties go into huddle after drubbing, reports **RAJESH MOUDGIL**

The stunning victory of the ruling Congress in Punjab in the recently held civic bodies' polls has made the opposition parties sit back and take a note.

Results of the elections to total 117 civic bodies including eight municipal corporations were declared a few days ago. The Congress swept 107 of the total 109 municipal councils and nagar panchayats, barring Ajnala and Majitha. Likewise, the ruling Congress also registered a thumping victory in seven of the total eight municipal corporations, barring Moga.

In other words, in the said elections, which were seen as the semi-finals to the assembly elections due early next year, the Congress has won 1,199 of the 1815 wards of the total 109 municipal councils and 281 of the 350 total eight municipal corporation seats, with Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) trailing at 289 and 33, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at 38 and 20, and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) at 57 and nine, while the remaining went largely to independents and BSP (K) and CPI winning in 13 and 12 wards, respectively.

The swing in favour of the Congress in comparison with the 2015 municipal corporation elections in Bathinda, Hoshiarpur, Moga and Pathankot districts has showcased the steep increase in the strengths of the fact — from 11 seats back then, the party's tally has improved to a whopping 149 now. Similarly, in the wards, from 356 in 2015, the Congress score now has gone up to 1,480.

Unlike the previous election held in 2015, both, the SAD and BJP fought these polls separately this time after the former recently parted ways with BJP-led National democratic alliance (NDA) over the contentious farm laws. In alliance, these two parties had won most of the councils last polls. The AAP too contested the elections for the first time on its party symbol.

The chief minister Capt Amarinder Singh, who has congratulated people for what he termed as spectacular win has held that the results are a 'foretaste' of assembly elections due in early 2022. He went on to add that the poll results

are not just validation of his government's policies but also total rejection of anti-people and anti-farmer SAD, AAP and BJP.

He also congratulated Punjab Congress president Sunil Jakhar, as well as all MLAs, members and workers of the party, for the sweeping victory in the civic polls, and held that the people of the state had clearly denounced the "divisive, undemocratic, unconstitutional and regressive agendas" of the three parties, named above.

The first major polls to be held in Punjab since the enactment of the contentious farm laws had also underscored people's angst with the BJP, "which was responsible for the anti-farmer legislation with the active support of its former ally, the SAD, and the collusion of ruling AAP in Delhi", the chief minister said.

"With the SAD, the AAP and the BJP not even a close second to the Congress and trailing even independent candidates in some wards, the pro-governance and pro-progress verdict of the urban voters of Punjab was a clear endorsement of their negation of their political ideologies," noted the chief minister.

"With these results, all these parties have got a foretaste of things to come in the Assembly elections, due just a year from now," said Capt Amarinder Singh. The drubbing that SAD, BJP and AAP have received in these civic polls is just the tip of the iceberg, and all three are set to be wiped out of Punjab's political arena, and subsequently from the nation's political landscape, in the months ahead, he said in a statement.

The SAD president Sukhbir Badal congratulated whom he termed in his Tweets "the brave Akali Dal warriors who asserted themselves and emerged as the most powerful and the only challengers to the corrupt and incompetent rulers in the civic polls". In another Tweet, he also said that the SAD workers also battled unprecedented repression and money bags and government machinery and yet emerged as a force to reckon with. "Writing on the wall; 2022 elections on — Congress gone", he added.

Reacting on the poll results, the AAP Punjab president Bhagwant Mann said in a statement that the same show that the party had strengthened its presence in cities and registered an increase in vote share compared to last election. It has also made major gains in Majha and Doaba regions, where the party was in a weak position in the past. Referring to several incidents of violence and attacks, he said that yet many AAP candidates had won.

Stating that even though the party candidates had won a few seats in the elections, Mann said, the vote share of the party had increased significantly in the urban areas. He said that in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the AAP had got around 5 to 5.5% votes in the urban areas. However in this election, the party got almost three times more votes than the 2019 Lok Sabha election.

The first major polls to be held in Punjab since the enactment of the contentious farm laws has underscored people's angst with the BJP, 'which is responsible for the anti-farmer legislation with the active support of its former ally, the SAD, and the collusion of ruling AAP in Delhi', the chief minister says

Mann said that the vote share of the party in every urban body of Punjab had increased considerably than before. He said that the party's vote share in many other local bodies, including Amloh, Amritsar, Baba Bakala, Banga, Batala, Dasuya, Fatehgarh Sahib, Khanna, Majitha, Nabha, Pathankot, Patti, Payal, Rajpura, Samrala and Sujanpur had increased significantly as compared to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and the party's position had been greatly strengthened. "This shows that the people of urban areas have increased inclination towards Aam Aadmi Party. Now along with the villages of Punjab, the people of the cities are also supporting the Aam Aadmi Party and expressing their trust in the party," he added.

He further said that despite extreme violence in Patti and Baba Bakala, the party increased its vote share significantly compared to the 2017 assembly elections. "The AAP candidates were attacked here and were threatened, yet many AAP candidates won in these local bodies. Now the Aam Aadmi Party has become strong in both rural and urban areas in Punjab. The party will fight stronger in the 2022 assembly elections and form its government," he added.

Mann said that Majha and Doaba, where the party was earlier in a weak position; a lot of support from the people was received in this election as well and the vote share increased significantly as compared to earlier. He thanked the urban voters who have relied on the Aam Aadmi Party and said that millions of urban people of Punjab voted for the Aam Aadmi Party for change. "Today, it is because of them that the party has strengthened its position in the urban areas of Punjab," he added.

The state AAP chief media coordinator Digvijay Dhanju said that it is subsequent to the poll results that the party top leaders including state incharge Jarnail Singh, co-incharge Raghav Chadha, state chief Bhagwant Mann, leader of opposition in the state assembly Harpal Singh Cheema would soon hold meetings with the state and district leaders as well as the candidates to take the stock of situation.

BJP's state chief Ashwani Sharma has also told newspersons that the results reflected the moral defeat of the Congress which blatantly misused the official machinery. He alleged that there was violence by Congress workers against BJP workers at over 24 places and there was no action by the police.

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Congress opposes farm laws across the country

The party's stand to openly support the farmer agitation on the borders of Delhi has helped the opposition party re-establish its credentials among the masses, writes **AMIT AGNIHOTRI**

The Congress, which had been lying low since the party's defeat in the 2019 national elections, has sprung into action and launched movements across the country to mobilise support among the farmers against the three contentious farm laws.

Before the Congress reaped huge electoral benefits in the recent Punjab local body polls, party leaders Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra had started addressing farmer conclaves in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

Indicating the Opposition party is banking big time on the issue, Rahul attacked the centre and picked holes in the three contentious farm laws while speaking in the Lok Sabha during a debate on the Union Budget 2021-22.

Rahul said the three farm laws would allow corporates to buy unlimited quantities of grains and hoard them. Noting the three laws would destroy the country's food security and hurt rural economy, the former Congress chief charged the central government was concerned only about the welfare of a few big corporates and said the Centre will have to take back the legislations.

The farmer protests at Delhi's borders going on for over two months are not an agitation but reflect a movement across the country, the Wayanad MP said as he pointed out that the new legislations did not allow a farmer to approach the court if any contract farming deal went sour.

Rahul urged the Opposition leaders to observe two minutes silence to pay tributes to over 200 farmers who have died during the agitation as the central government had not done so. While members of the Trinamool Congress and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party supported the Congress move, the ruling BJP alleged that Rahul had violated the house rules.

Rahul had decided to speak in the lower house of Parliament as he wanted to respond to an earlier speech made by PM Modi who said that the Opposition did not refer to the intent and content of the three farm laws during a debate to thank President Ram Nath Kovind's address to the joint sitting of the two houses on January 29.

The former Congress chief compared the three farm laws to the previous controversial policy decisions of the government like demonetisation in 2016 and later the GST.

Minister of state for finance Anurag Thakur criticised Rahul saying the Congress leader did not speak on the budget to which the Wayanad MP replied that farm issues were part of the budget as well.

Taking the protests outside Delhi, Rahul addressed a party-organised farmer conclave, referred to as Kisan Mahapanchayat, in Rajasthan where he targeted the central government for pushing the anti-peasant legislations.

"Some people say the cell-phone is the biggest business in Hindustan, others say it is aeroplanes, road transport. But the reality is that the biggest busi-

ness in Hindustan is agriculture. It is the biggest business in the world. Crores get their food through this business," Rahul said.

"So, understand this...it is not an attack on farmers. It is an attack on 40 percent of India. Farmers are aware and they realized it first. If these laws are implemented the farmer will be gone and his land will be gone as well. So will be small shopkeepers, businessmen and labourers. Forty percent of India will become unemployed," he said.

Later in February, the state Congress protested against the farm laws in all the districts by taking out processions including camels and elephants.

Congress-ruled Punjab and Rajasthan had passed separate state laws to negate the three central farm laws last year indicating the party was prepared to wage a long battle with the centre over the issue.

The Rajasthan Congress did well in the urban municipal corporation polls after its set back in the rural local body elections in December 2020.

Before that, Rahul along with Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh, had staged a tractor rally in the agrarian state to mobilise public opinion against the contentious laws.

Congress insiders said the party's stand to openly support the farmer agitation on the borders of Delhi has helped the opposition party re-establish its credentials among the masses.

Sensing opportunity, Rahul's sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, in charge of Uttar Pradesh, too has been addressing party-backed mega farmer conclaves in western UP's Saharanpur on February 10, Bijnor on February 15, Muzaffarnagar on February 20 and Mathura on February 23.

For both Rahul and Priyanka, the template is the same. They brand the central farm laws as anti-farmer and pro-rich and assure the voters that if the Congress is voted to power, the party will scrap the controversial legislations.

Though the next general elections are scheduled to be held three years away in 2024, the farm laws have given a strong handle to the Congress to target the BJP and reassert itself in the states.

The benefits of the strategy are already showing in Punjab, where chief minister Amarinder Singh claimed that the first major elections held after the controversial farm laws were enacted last year, reflected people's anger with the BJP.

Singh said the Congress' success in the recent municipal poll also showed an approval of his development-oriented policies and were in a way a rejection of the anti-people politics of the BJP and its former ally Shiromani Akali Dal.

The Congress swept the local polls by winning 98 of the 109 municipal councils and nagar panchayats and won 7 of the eight big municipal corporations that went to polls on February 14.

Both Rahul and Priyanka brand the farm laws as anti-farmer and pro-rich and assure the voters if the Congress is voted to power, the party will scrap the controversial legislations. Though the next general elections are scheduled in 2024, the farm laws have given it a strong handle to Congress to reassert itself in the states

Congress won 1,199 of the 1,815 municipal wards and 281 of the 350 municipal corporations with SAD behind at 289 and 33, BJP at 38 and 20 and AAP at 57 and 9. Remaining seats went to independents and BSP(K) and CPI which won in 13 and 12 wards respectively.

The swing in favour of the Congress as compared to the 2015 municipal corporation polls in Bhatinda, Hoshiarpur, Moga and Pathankot districts indicates the ruling party has improved its performance.

Many are already seeing these results as an advantage for the Congress ahead of the 2022 Assembly polls given the BJP and SAD have decided to contest separately.

Congress managers could gauge the potential of the farm laws issue when farmers of Punjab, Haryana, western UP and Uttarakhand had started camping across Delhi's borders since November 26, 2020 demanding repeal of the three contentious farm laws.

After the Republic Day tractor rally, which was marked by violence at some places, farmer leader Rakesh Tikait and others have taken the protests to villages across western UP and in neighbouring Haryana by organising Kisan Mahapanchayats.

Priyanka had been focusing on western UP for a while and had raised the issue of pending cane dues to the tune of ₹10,000 cr earlier. Her renewed pitch against the three farm laws is finding resonance with the peasants.

She also visited the family of young farmer Navrat Singh, who died during the tractor rally, in Rampur on February 4.

When Tikait was asked by the local administration to vacate the Ghazipur border, UP based parties like the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party too had backed the peasants and attacked the BJP for ignoring the plight of the peasants.

Besides, the SP and the BSP, the Rashtriya Lok Dal based mostly in western parts of UP too has become active in mobilising public support against the farm laws in an attempt to reconnect with its Jat support base.

Though the farmers had kept political parties away from their movement since November 2020, UP Congress chief Ajay Kumar Lallu and RLD leader Jayant Chaudhary were quick to come out in support of Tikait and met him at the Ghazipur border to express solidarity with the food growers.

Congress managers claim they have been active against the farm laws for months. In January, Congress leaders

in BJP-ruled Karnataka had staged a mega farmer protest in the capital Bengaluru to oppose the three farm laws.

Congress leader DK Shivakumar alleged the police detained many party leaders and farmers who had come for the Raj Bhavan Chalo campaign. Leader of the Opposition in the Karnataka assembly K Siddaramaiah too charged the centre was stubborn towards the farmers agitating on Delhi's outskirts.

In Bhopal, capital of BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh, over 50 Congress workers and five policemen were injured in a clash that broke out during a protest march against the central farm laws in January.

Around 110 Congress workers, including former chief minister Digvijay Singh, were detained but were later released. The march was part of the two- week programme that the opposition party had planned in support of the farmers camping outside Delhi.

Over the coming days, farmer conclaves will be held across Madhya Pradesh according to a statement from the joint front of farmers.

The Congress also organised farmer protests in Jharkhand where it shares power with the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha and held a series of protests culminating into a tractor rally in Hazaribagh on February 20.

The Jammu and Kashmir Congress too staged protests in Jammu and blocked the Jammu-Pathankot road in support of farmers at Delhi's borders. The J&K Vikas Front and the All India Kisan Sabha also staged separate protests in Kathua over the issue.

Similar events were organised in Delhi to counter the BJP and ruling Aam Aadmi Party which is also trying to present itself as a champion of farmers in the national capital and in Punjab, where the party emerged as the main opposition in 2017.

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal is slated to address a farmer conclave in Meerut on February 28 as part of the party's plans to expand base in UP. Initially, AAP had hesitations over the farmer agitation but as the protests being held peacefully in biting cold gathered public support, Kejriwal met the peasants at the Singhu border and assured them all help.

The swing in favour of Congress as compared to the 2015 municipal polls in Bathinda, Hoshiarpur, Moga and Pathankot districts indicates the ruling party has improved its performance in Punjab

After facing pressure from the UP police to disperse from the Ghazipur border, Rakesh Tikait and other farmer leaders are busy organising farmer conclaves in Haryana, where the ruling BJP-JJP government came under pressure from the local peasants over the issue.

Haryana BJP leader and former chief parliamentary secretary Rampal Majra quit the party over the Centre's farm laws saying the legislations, when implemented, will adversely impact other sections of the society also.

Majra, a three-time former MLA, had switched over to the BJP from the Indian National Lok Dal just before the 2019 Assembly elections. Last year, he dubbed the farm laws anti-farmer and claimed that apprehensions about the minimum support price (MSP) were not unfounded.

As farm protests gathered steam, over 60 villages in Haryana banned the entry of leaders belonging to both BJP and the Jananayak Janata Party (JJP).

JJP leader and deputy chief minister Dushyant Chautala had also met PM Modi to express his concerns over the three laws as party's lawmakers faced public pressure over the issue.

On January 10, hundreds of farmers indulged in violence at a farmer conclave in Karnal ahead of Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar's arrival forcing the organisers to cancel the event. The conclave had been organised by the BJP to educate the farmers about the positives of the three farm laws.

Before that the BJP-JJP suffered losses in many of their strongholds in the Haryana local body polls in December 2020 after the Bharatiya Kisan Union had given a call for the boycott of the ruling combine.

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COLUMN

NEWS & VIEWS

BHARAT HITESHI

Hiteshi is an independent journalist-turned-author and a political commentator. The views expressed are his own

Why farmers' protest continues unabated?

MSP remains most relevant to the farmers and primarily to those from the surplus states that have been feeding the nation for long. Thus, the unity and mutual understanding that the farmers of Punjab and Haryana have shown on the issue of the three agricultural laws have helped the agitation gain momentum and widespread support

Over 60 percent of India's population still depends on agriculture for livelihood, though the sector accounts for only about 15 percent of the GDP and dependence on farming has increased after the coronavirus pandemic that mainly affected the urban economy. Significantly, Punjab, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh are the only states where bulk of the wheat and rice is produced by the FCI and other government agencies for the buffer stock as per the National Food Security Act. This is the reason MSP is most relevant to the farmers and primarily to those from the surplus states that have been feeding the nation for long.

According to information gathered from the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution, the procurement of wheat from farmers by Government agencies had touched an all-time record figure in 2020, when total procurement for the Central pool reached 382 lakh metric tonnes (LMT) surpassing the earlier record of 381.48 LMT achieved during 2012-13. This had been accomplished during the trying times of Covid-19 pandemic when the whole country was under lockdown.

The commencement of procurement was delayed by a fortnight due to the first lockdown and was kicked off only from

The govt says the new laws will help to strengthen basic farm sector infrastructure via greater private investments. However, the MSP assurance has emerged as the main sticking point in the farmers' protest

State wise procurement of wheat and paddy during 2020 was as follows-

Wheat

Sl. No.	Name of the State	Quantity of wheat procured (in Lakh MTs)
1	Madhya Pradesh	129
2	Punjab	127
3	Haryana	74
4	Uttar Pradesh	32
5	Rajasthan	19
6	Others	01
Total		38

Paddy

Sl. No.	Name of the State	Quantity of Paddy procured (in Lakh MTs)
1	Telangana	64
2	Andhra Pradesh	31
3	Odisha	14
4	Tamil Nadu	04
5	Kerala	04
6	Others	02
TOTAL		119

April 15 in most of the wheat surplus states as against the standard April 1. Extraordinary efforts were made by state governments and all government procuring agencies led by Food Corporation of India to ensure that wheat is procured from farmers without any delay and in a safe manner. The number of purchase centers was increased from 14,838 to 21,869 year by opening procurement centers in all possible locations, in addition to traditional mandis. This helped to reduce farmers' footfall in mandis and ensured proper social distancing.

Technological solutions were deployed to regulate the daily inflows into mandis through token systems. These measures, along with actions on the ground for regular sanitizing, earmarking of dumping areas for each farmer etc, ensured that none of the food grain procurement centers became Covid-19 hotspot anywhere in the country.

Madhya Pradesh became the largest contributor to the Central pool with 129 LMT wheat, surpassing Punjab which procured 127 LMT. Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan also made significant contributions to the national procurement of wheat. All over India, 42 lakh farmers had been benefited and a total amount of about ₹73,500 crore had been paid to them towards Minimum Support Price for wheat. The hefty inflow of food grains into the Central pool ensured that FCI is ready to meet any additional requirement of food grains for the people of the country in coming months.

During the same period, 119 Lakh MT paddy was also procured by the government agencies through 13,606 purchase centers. Maximum procurement was done by Telangana which contributed 64 LMT followed by Andhra Pradesh with 31 LMT. However, between 2014-15 and 2019-20 the average production of wheat was 169 lakh tonnes in Punjab, of which 69% was procured, and 114 lakh tonnes in Haryana, of which 66.5% was procured.

Punjab and Haryana are the only states in which the bulk of the wheat and rice produced is procured by the government, which helps explain why farmers from these states are at the forefront of protests, fearing a disruption of the procurement under the MSP regime. Data from the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, shows that between 2014-15 and 2019-20 the average production of wheat was 169 lakh tonnes in Punjab, of which 69% was procured, and 114 lakh tonnes in Haryana, of which 66.5% was procured.

Among other major producer states, farmers in MP managed to sell 37% of their produce to the central pool, while the proportion was 14% for Rajasthan and under 10% for UP. Gujarat, Bihar and Maharashtra are the other states that produced an average over 15 lakh tonnes during this period. These states, however, managed to sell less than 1% of their produce to the central pool. Overall, the six-year average procurement was 300 lakh tonnes of wheat (30.6% of the country's total production), of which over 64% came from Punjab and Haryana. Talking about paddy, the principal crop is rice and Punjab on an average grew 121 lakh tonnes between 2014-15 and 2019-20, of which 86% was procured. The corresponding figures for Haryana were 44 lakh tonnes and 78% procured.

With this, we can draw the inference that among major wheat and rice producing states, it is only in Punjab and Haryana that the government procures almost 70% of the wheat and about 80% of the rice. Any disruption in the MSP procurement would impact a large number of farmers in these states.

An analysis of the number of farmers benefiting from MSP and per farmer procurement also shows why these two states are the most prominent in the ongoing protests. When it comes to wheat, there were only four states where more

than one lakh farmers on average benefited from MSP between 2016-17 and 2019-20. Punjab has 8.5 lakh such farmers while the corresponding figures are 7.3 lakh for Haryana, 8 lakh for Madhya Pradesh and 7 lakh for Uttar Pradesh. Among these states, the average procurement per farmer was over 100 quintals only in Punjab and Haryana. In the case of rice, there were five states where about 10 lakh or more farmers benefited from procurement at MSP, and Punjab and Haryana figure in the list along with Telangana, Chhattisgarh and Odisha. Once again, Punjab leads in per farmer procurement with an average of over 100 quintals.

The MSP announced by the government acts as a signal price for all trade in crops across the country. What actually happens is that small farmers need cash almost immediately after harvest, so they sell their crop to local grain merchants. The merchants pick up the produce from the entire area and store it, till the official procurement process begins. When FCI begins procurement at MSP, the local grain merchants offload a part of their stock to the MSP. If grain traders were exposed to a regime where there was no guaranteed MSP, the traders won't buy crops from small farmers at high rates fearing fluctuation in rates without MSP.

Farmers begin sowing based on the previous season's demand and if demand trends change in the market and there is no MSP, the markets are bound to crash. No doubt that MSP can ensure a steady income to farmers. Little doubt that only the Centre and States can intervene to protect farmers from the fluctuations by market forces. That can only be done by government procurement at an assured minimum support price.

In reality, the three new laws ensure that farmers will be powerless in front of big corporate agri-buyers. The farmer will have to ensure the quality of the crop to the satisfaction of the corporate sector. Indeed, the lifeline of farmers, the MSP will not be there to provide succor to farmers.

Now a brief about the farm laws: The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act. They had first come in the month of June as the three Ordinances before being approved by Parliament during the Monsoon Session by a voice vote.

The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act provides for setting up a mechanism allowing the farmers to sell their farm produce outside the Agriculture Produce Market Committees (APMCs). Any licence-holder trader can buy the produce from the farmers at mutually agreed prices. This trade of farm produce will be free of mandi tax imposed by the state governments. The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act allows farmers to do contract farming and market their products freely. The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act is an amendment to the existing Essential Commodities Act. This law now frees items such as food grains, pulses, edible oils and onion for trade except in extraordinary situations.

The three new laws apparently ensure that farmers will be powerless in front of big corporate agri-buyers. The farmer will have to ensure the quality of the crop to the satisfaction of the corporate sector. Indeed, the lifeline of farmers, the MSP will not be there to provide succor to farmers

The government has said the new laws will help to strengthen basic farm sector infrastructure through greater private investments. However, the MSP assurance has emerged as the main sticking point in the farmers' protest. There is an apprehension among the farmers that allowing outside-APMC trade of farm produce would lead to lesser buying by the government agencies in the approved mandis.

The protesting farmers say the new laws would thus make the MSP system irrelevant and they would not have any assured income from their farming. The farmers fear that post new farm laws, the MSP system may crumble and that is why they are the ones who are most vocal in their protest against the farm laws and demanding that the MSP should be made mandatory for both APMC and private mandis. The FCI procures food grains and sells these to the Below Poverty Line (BPL) families through the Public Distribution System (PDS) at a concessionary rate.

The rising food bill under the existing MSP system of the government translates into pressure on the fiscal deficit in the annual budget of the Union Government and that is the rationale behind the new farm laws, experts opine. But farmers are worried because the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020, provides for contract farming, under which farmers will produce crops as per contracts with corporate investors for a mutually agreed remuneration. Surely, a key debate after the enactment of three farm-reform laws and the subsequent protests is around the MSP, a system guaranteeing farmers assured prices for their produce through procurement.

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SIGNS OF THE TIMES

HUMRA QURAISHI

The Delhi-based writer and columnist's books include Kashmir: The Untold Story. *She co-authored a series of writings with the late Khushwant Singh and her short stories are part of anthologies. The views expressed are her own*

Only non-violence and dialogues are solutions

Warfare does not sort out a thing and sooner or later one has to resort to the non-violent methods. It is better to have dialogue in the first place and not to do so after the destruction that war invariably unleashes on people

February 6 was Khan Abdul Ghaffar's Khan birth anniversary; he was born on 6 February 1890, in Utmanzai, Pakistan. Also, known as the Frontier Gandhi, he played a very significant role in the Independence struggle. Needless to add that today, with the changing political climate, he and his struggles get bypassed, if not side tracked.

Few years back, Delhi-based activist Faisal Khan had formed the 'Khudai Khidmatgars' (Servants of God), in memory of the Frontier Gandhi. And in keeping with his philosophy, Faisal Khan and his fellow activists reached out to anyone and everyone in distress. They also set up a 'home' in New Delhi, for all humans, from any religion or region. Justice Rajinder Sachar had inaugurated it and we were all present at that touching ceremony. But what fate awaited Faisal Khan! Few months back he and one of his Khudai Khidmatgar colleagues were jailed. Why? Because he was seen offering namaaz in the premises of a temple!

Provoking one to quip: Don't we all belong to the same Creator! Don't we all come up with prayers from the heart, whether rendered in any language or at any place! Don't we all rush towards a peaceful place for solace, where we can pray!

Whilst keying in, nostalgia tightening its hold. I recall in school, Lucknow's Loreto Convent, I would rush towards the school chapel to sit there and pray. This was whenever I would be hurt and going through emotional lows. Mind you, no upheavals nor threats that a Hindoostani Musalmaan girl was seen sitting praying in the confines of the chapel of a missionary school. Nah, none of those communally surcharged apprehensions were in circulation along the strain that the selfless nuns were trying to convert the students, from this to that! Those were good old days, when the political mafia wasn't hounding on any given alibi or pretext!

Getting back to Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and with that to his grandson, Asfandyar Wali Khan. I met Asfandyar Wali Khan in 2004, in New Delhi, when he was here, at the invitation of Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, Rajmohan Gandhi.

I'd done a detailed interview with Asfandyar Wali Khan for a national daily and I loved the way he spoke out in that absolutely forthright blatant way. He was of the firm view that non- violence is the only way forward, "See, there are only two ways to sort out any issue — using the military or through dialogue. Military or warfare does not sort out a thing and sooner or later one has to resort to the non-violent methods, which means to have a dialogue. That is what both the Gandhis — Mahatma and Ghaffar Khan — had strongly believed in and practised. It is better to have a dialogue in the first place and not to do so after the destruction that war invariably unleashes on people."

And on why liberals like his grandfather are forgotten by today's world, he corrected me, "This is not entirely true. There are students in Germany and in the US who are doing research on him. Then let me tell you this incident. In the mid-90s I was travelling in India and on way to Agra we stopped at a motel where a young man came up to me, touched the thick khadi weave kurta I was wearing and kept saying, 'Frontier Gandhi used to wear such Khadi.'"

And when I'd asked him about his recollections of his grandfather, he looked lost in thoughts, before detailing, "Most of the time he was in prison. In fact, he spent almost 33 years in jail (in Pakistan) and for about seven

years he lived in exile in Afghanistan. I managed to spend only about two years with him. There was one aspect to him that always stood out: his stark simplicity. Once when we were invited for dinner at an Afghan friend's home, my grandfather ordered all the dishes to be removed from the dastarkhwan except saag. To that the hosts commented that he is stricter than God, for God at least lets his people eat as much as they want! Even to this day, in my family, we have only two dishes for each meal...He always thought about the welfare of the people and that's about it. He was extremely simple and that particular photograph of his still haunts me — he alighting from the plane with a little bundle tucked under his arm and Indira Gandhi waiting to receive him ... He lived by his convictions, and in 1929 when Mahatma Gandhi called for a non-violent struggle against the British rule, he responded by forming an 'army' of 1,00,000 men — the Khudai Khidmatgars (Servants of God) who worked with him to take on the British through non-violent ways."

And Asfandyar Wali Khan had come up with this rather simplistic explanation to the growing turmoil in world, "If you have two badmashes in a village, it's okay, because they will be busy settling scores with each other. But there will be chaos and confusion if there is only one badmash left! That's the trouble in today's world .There is only one badmash left! ...Also, religion was used by Americans to create their base in Afghanistan. If you have studied Afghan history, you'd know that their struggles have always been based on nationalism and not religion. It is the US that brought in religion and used it in recent wars. This phase has been like a curse for the people of Afghanistan."

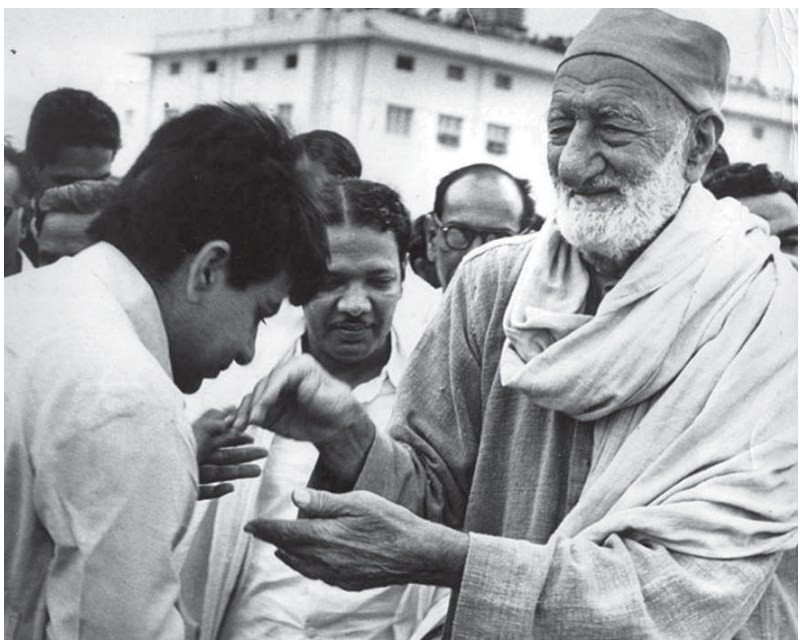
LET THE YOUNG SPEAK OUT!

Activist Disha Ravi's arrest brings to the fore haunting memories of the blatant hounding of the young, the entire winter-spring stretch of 2020, when students of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Aligarh Muslim University faced police atrocities. Why? Because they cried out against the CAA and also against the handling of the communal rioting that shook North East Delhi. The State targeted and attacked unarmed students and scholars as though they were terrorists! Cops were seen thrashing and beating and kicking students, in full public view!

◆◆◆

One cannot overlook the fact that in recent years the State machinery is rather too steadily intruding into the University campus. The so called 'happenings' on the campus of the Hyderabad Central University, Delhi University, Allahabad University, Benaras Hindu University, Jadavpur University were pointers to the fact that the State machinery was used to sabotage and throttle any of those rebellious cries.

The University students I have been meeting and interacting with, told me that many were detained for questioning, even on grounds of mere suspicion. Once their names are entered in the police registers and records, starts off their journey to hell! Each time a crime is committed in the area or even in the



Khudai Khidmatgar founder Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan's grandson Asfandyar Wali Khan says, 'Most of the time he (Frontier Gandhi) was in prison. In fact, he spent almost 33 years in jail (in Pakistan) and for about seven years he lived in exile in Afghanistan. I managed to spend only about two years with him. There was one aspect to him that always stood out: his stark simplicity'

adjoining area, they are the first to be called for questioning.

Is free speech or thought or even dissent to be controlled by the State? Have the planners and police-wallahs pondered on the repercussions of throttling the voice of the young and also of the not- so-young! Tell me, where do I go and express my disgust or anger or a combination of the two!

These last few years have been very traumatic to say the least. And what lies ahead could pave way for more traumas, with detentions and arrests seemingly an ongoing trend.

♦♦♦

WITH DISASTORS AND TRAGEDIES TAKING PLACE IN UTTARAKHAND , one is thinking of PROTIMA BEDI — she had died in a landslide, on August 18, 1998, in Uttarakhand's Pithoragarh.

Much before I interviewed Protima Bedi I had been spotting her all over this capital city, New Delhi. Some aspects stood out, unchanging — she was never alone but always accompanied by a male friend, who invariably happened to be one of those who's who, from the creamy lot this city houses in plenty. She always wore simple cotton stuff; very often the traditional mundu (Kerala's two piece saris) tied rather low, with her mid riff amply revealed. She didn't seem to wear much make up, except a big-sized bindi and lipstick on her thick lips! That pout caught attention. Oh, yes, she looked attractive and she knew that people were staring at her, rather ogling!

I had met Protima Bedi and spoken to her along the informal strain, at social dos and gatherings, but a detailed interview with her came up when she was all set to dance for the newly formed forum — Association of British Scholars (ABS). And with that, she was all set to collect enough money for the dance school, Nrityagram, she had set up in Karnataka.

And as the interview progressed, it got more than apparent that she did not feel comfortable answering any of the queries related to the then reigning political figure of Karnataka, Ramkrishna Hedge, whose name was more than linked with her. ... She'd retorted and reacted to any of those romantic links to him, "If that was true

'If you have two badmashes in a village, it's okay, because they will be busy settling scores with each other. But there will be chaos and confusion if there is only one badmash left! That's the trouble in today's world .There is only one badmash left!' says Asfandyar Wali Khan

then I wouldn't be begging for rupees for my dance school."

But didn't her dance school get ample funds from the Department of Culture? "Of course we got, but we need more funds. After all, I'm taking our traditional dance to the rural areas, for that's where it belongs. Why should cultural dance forms get limited to the urbane elite, viewing in the air-conditioned halls! I have taken our traditional dance forms to where it belongs — to rural India."

But with all her possible contacts, funding couldn't be such a problem. Well, not such a problem that she's reduced to 'begging'?

"What contacts! I'm so involved in my dance village that I have no time to think of anything else. From early morning I'm so busy with the daily chores. We do all the work ourselves — cleaning, cooking, washing, teaching."

And with that she took to explaining the traditional dance forms must be taught to women and that its time women of this country be given their due freedom in the actual sense of the term.

"How can I rest in peace when so many injustices are going on .Look at the way our women are being suppressed! Look at the crap going on in the name of culture!"

And when I pointed out to her that very contradiction — she dancing for the urban elite forum ABS, yet talking of rural India , she hit out, "For funds! For my dancers! For my dance village! For my passion, my dance school! I'm one of those women who never ever gives up."

♦♦♦

MUCH AFTER THE VALENTINE'S DAY HAS PASSED AWAY!

This verse of Ghalib, from Hasan Abdullah's volume *The Evolution of Ghalib* (Rupa):

"The affairs of nightingale make flowers go on chuckling/

That what people perceive as love is but quirks of mind.'

'From bonds of love I freed myself a hundred times/

But I am helpless, my heart itself is foe of freedom,'

'Now it is me and my craving for gloom and melancholy, Ghalib/

Feeling warm greeting of worldly people heart got burnt to ashes."

♦♦♦

And writer Gabriel García Márquez this hitting sentence for all those who believe in love, beyond the Valentine's Day: "Sex is the consolation you have when you can't have love."

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Is mixopathy a blessing or a threat?

Allopathic doctors continue to oppose 'mixopathy' plans of the Central government, reports **MADIHA RAZA**

The Indian Medical Association (IMA) has intensified its demonstration against 'mixopathy' "to reinstate the transparency of the modern medical profession". Members of IMA and modern medicine doctors across the country go on hunger strike till 14 February, against the proposal of approving postgraduate Ayurveda graduates to perform surgeries based on modern scientific medicine.

Doctors across the nation are opposed to the move and demand the Centre to remove it. Since notification was cleared on 22 November last year, doctors have been protesting in several parts of the country. Medics from the All Indian Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi, and other government hospitals wore black bands to register their protest.

According to them, this step will not only encourage already rampant quackery, but also undermine the safety of the public. Moreover, it will severely influence and deprive the public to choose between modern medicine and Ayurveda and it may cause major disruption to the healthcare system across the country.

As per the notification amended by The Indian Medicine Central Council, under the AYUSH Ministry, Government of India, Post Graduate Ayurveda Education Regulation 2020, about 58 surgical procedures which include general surgery, urology, surgical gastroenterology, ENT, ophthalmology and dental medicine are notified by CCIM, that Ayurveda postgraduates in Shalyathanthra and Shalakyathanthra are mandated to undergo training to independently perform the procedures.

The Ayurveda graduation course stretches for four-and-a-half years, followed by one year of internship, six months of which are at an Ayurveda hospital and the remaining at a civil, general or public healthcare centre. For postgraduation, students need to study for another three years and have clinical postings as well.

Under the 2016 regulations, postgraduate medical students of Ayurveda specialise in Shalakya Tantra, Shalya Tantra, and Prasuti and Stree Roga (Obstetrics and Gynaecology). Students passing these three disciplines are granted a master degree in surgery in Ayurveda. For MS (Ayurveda) Shalya Tantra (General Surgery) There is a description of Thirty Nine Procedures of surgery. While in the MS (Ayurveda) Shalakya Tantra, Nine procedures for Eyes, Three procedures each for Ear and Nose & Two procedures each for Mouth and Dental health are considered.

Indian Medical Association condemned the move and doctors termed it as khichdification or Mixopathy as it denotes an attempt to mix various medical therapies. According to them, it is an attempt to mix the knowledge, procedures and techniques of modern Medical Sciences with traditional Ayurveda. They appealed to the Central Government to discontinue from proceeding with mixopathy as the option for universal health coverage.

"It is nothing but a blatant attempt at mixopathy and khichadification of medical education and practice. The CCIM amendments cannot be seen in isolation. The National Education Policy 2020 speaks of medical pluralism and lateral entry laying the foundation legitimising mixopathy. "India remains at the frontier of modern medicine today with medical care of international standards and well-reputed Indian doctors serving the globe. What is the point in losing such a legacy and leadership," asked IMA's former national president Rajan Sharma.

On the other hand, while asking about the strategy of the government behind this move Dr. J.A Jayalal, National President Indian Medical Association said- there is a major economic reason for promoting ayurvedic system by the government. He said there are 411 ayurvedic centres across the country and the government wants to promote them because of the less demand for Ayurveda compared to Allopathy.

He said approving and equaling ayurvedic practices to modern medicine is a bonanza for Ayurveda undergraduate students who will easily get a postgraduate degree free of cost. "No doubt, there are a lot of economic and monetary benefits of promoting Ayurveda practices in the country. However, by doing this they are playing with the life of the public," he added. "We are not opposing Ayurvedic drugs but surgery is not their domain. Surgery is an area which comes under modern medicine.

"We are against the proposal of Ayurvedic doctors performing surgeries in hospitals following Allopathy medicine and using Allopathy drugs. Also, by mixing Allopath and Ayurveda the government is degrading Ayurveda as well. We are not making this fight for our own fraternity; this fight is for the welfare of the community and people. Our struggle will continue till we get the positive reply from the government," he said.

Will this move ensure wider healthcare excess to Indians in a country where the doctor-patient ratio is way below what the WHO recommends? Or the risks outweigh the gains? Whatever would be the end result of this rift, poor people will ultimately suffer the most if the fight continues.

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India's vaccine diplomacy

Such collaboration, according to PM Modi, can become the pathway for greater regional cooperation among the members in other areas too as they share so many common challenges — climate change; natural disasters, poverty, illiteracy and social and gender imbalances besides centuries old cultural and people-to-people linkages, reports **AMIT AGNIHOTRI**

India, known as a pharmacy to the world, is pursuing vaccine diplomacy to win friends across the Covid-19-hit world in a clear counter to China from where the Coronavirus originated.

India impressed the world by putting up a brave face against the Chinese aggression along the Line of Actual Control in eastern Ladakh and forcing the dragon country to agree to a mutual withdrawal but by now being used to cover the domestic population as well as to help the South Asian and the Indo-Pacific island nations.

Over the past years, China has been investing huge resources in the South-Asian region to gain influence over India, which is now trying to upstage the dragon nation by supplying Covid-19 vaccines.

While the developed world has mostly been fending for itself, India's act of supplying the vaccine to other countries, despite a huge pressure to meet the local needs, has been taken note of globally.

Under the 'vaccine maitri' initiative, started January 20, India has supplied lakhs of domestically produced vaccines to various countries while launching the world's largest vaccination programme at home.

According to government data, India has supplied 229.7 lakh doses to the global community. Of these, 64.7 lakh doses have been supplied to as grant while 165 lakh doses have been given on a commercial basis.

A breakup of data related to countries which have received the vaccines as a grant shows that Bangladesh was sent 20 lakh doses, Myanmar-17 lakh, Nepal-10 lakh, Bhutan-1.5 lakh, Maldives-1 lakh, Mauritius-1 lakh, Seychelles- 50,000, Sri Lanka- 5 lakh, Bahrain-1 lakh, Oman- 1 lakh, Afghanistan- 5 lakh, Barbados- 1 lakh and Dominica- 70,000.

The countries which have received the vaccines on a commercial basis include Brazil- 20 lakh, Morocco- 60 lakh, Bangladesh- 50 lakh, Myanmar- 20 lakh, Egypt- 50,000, Algeria- 50,000, South Africa- 10 lakh, Kuwait- 2 lakh and UAE- 2 lakh.

"We have played the role of the first responder in our neighbourhood and reached out to countries beyond," said PM Modi, who had earlier stated that India's vaccine production and delivery capacity will be used to fight the pandemic for the benefit of humanity.

According to Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Anurag Shrivastava, India "will continue to take forward its global vaccine supply initiative and will cover more countries in a phased manner."

"Decisions on these supplies will of course be calibrated as per domestic production and the requirements of the national vaccination programme, which is the largest vaccination drive in the world," he said.

India has plans to give further quantities of vaccines to Oman- 1 lakh doses and to CARICOM countries, including Nicaragua-2 lakh and Pacific Island states-2 lakh doses.

India has also offered to vaccinate all members of foreign diplomats accredited to the country with the domestically made vaccines. The modalities like the time frame the venue etc. are being worked out by the ministry of external affairs and the programme will cover all eligible foreign diplomats and their family members.

The response from the foreign missions is being collated and the prioritization will be in accordance with the proto-

col established for Indians.

Further, India has agreed to supply 10 million vaccine doses to Africa and one million to UN health workers under the Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) facility coordinated by the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations (GAVI).

Indian vaccine capacities will generate another 1.1 billion doses for the WHO-led COVAX scheme that distributes them to developing countries across the world.

Cambodia is also in the process of negotiating a deal for 1 lakh doses of the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine produced by the Serum Institute of India (SII). The vaccines were reserved for Cambodia after its government requested 1 million vaccines, India's Ambassador to Cambodia Dr Devyani Uttam Khobragade said.

In a way, India's efforts to supply vaccines to other nations are an effective counter to the vaccine nationalism being practiced by the rich countries who seem to care less for the developing nations.

India and South Africa had started a plan in October last year to ensure accessibility of affordable vaccines through the World Trade Organization (WTO).

While supplying vaccines to the developing countries, India is also ensuring that domestic manufacturers will have adequate stocks to meet local requirements. Consultations involving a number of ministries preceding such supplies are also taking place.

At this stage, two made-in-India vaccines Serum Institute's Covishield and Bharat Biotech's developed Covaxin, are in production. There are four vaccines which are in the active clinical trial stage and the 15 vaccines in the pre-clinical stages.

Last year in June, the SII had a licensing agreement with British-Swedish pharmaceutical company, AstraZeneca, for supplying one billion doses of the Oxford University Covid-19 vaccine to developing countries. India's Bharat Biotech together with the Indian Council of Medical Research also developed a vaccine called the 'Covaxin'.

Regarding Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, for which Dr Reddy's Laboratories has sought an emergency use approval, the government has said that process will unfold in the coming days and that the authorisation process will be expedited.

By August the Indian government hopes to vaccine around 300 million citizens.

India is one of the largest makers of DPT, BCG and Measles vaccines with 60 percent global vaccine production in the country and supplies 1.5 billion doses annually to over 150 countries. The World Health Organization sources 70 percent of essential immunization vaccines from India. India has been appreciated as the pharmacy to the world over the past two decades largely due to production and supply of generic drugs all over the world. The Indian pharmaceutical industry was worth $20 billion in 2019-20.

In 2020, India had supplied large quantities of Hydroxychloroquine, considered to be effective in the initial treatment of Covid-19 and Paracetamol to over 100 nations across the world in daunting logistical circumstances imposed by lockdowns.

India's effort to supply vaccines to other nations is an effective counter to the vaccine nationalism being practiced by the rich countries who seem to care less for the developing nations

Indian rapid response teams were deployed in 8 countries and Indian naval vessels and air force airplanes delivered supplies along a wide arc to friends and partners.

Earlier, PM Modi had promised at the UN General Assembly to make Indian manufactured vaccines affordable and accessible to all of humanity.

While former diplomat KC Singh questioned the government's move to send vaccines abroad instead of meeting domestic requirements first, some experts opined that India was mixing its pharma production capacities with diplomatic ambitions rather well.

On February 18 PM Modi addressed a workshop of 10 South-Asian and Indo-Pacific island countries on Covid-19 management and cooperation and recalled when the pandemic had hit the world last year, many experts voiced concern about the densely populated region but "we all met this challenge with a coordinated response."

As a result, these countries created the Covid-19 Emergency Response Fund to meet the immediate costs of fighting the pandemic and shared resources - medicines, PPE, and testing equipment.

Suggesting further ways to deepen cooperation, PM Modi asked the nations to consider creating a special visa scheme for doctors and nurses, so that they can travel quickly within the region during health emergencies, on the request of the receiving country.

He also asked the nations if the respective civil aviation ministries can coordinate a regional air ambulance agreement for medical contingencies, and can the members create a regional platform for collating, compiling and studying data about the effectiveness of Covid-19 vaccines among the populations.

Further, the PM urged the member nations if they can create a regional network for promoting technology-driven epidemiology, for preventing future pandemics and moving beyond Covid-19, can they share successful public health policies and schemes as he offered Ayushman Bharat and Jan Arogya schemes as useful case-studies for friends in the region. The PM noted that such collaboration can become the pathway for greater regional cooperation among the members in other areas too as they share so many common challenges — climate change; natural disasters, poverty, illiteracy, and social and gender imbalances besides centuries old cultural and people-to-people linkages.

Noting the 21st Century will be the Asian century, the PM said it cannot be without greater integration among the countries of South Asia and the Indian Ocean island countries.

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COLUMN

FAR & WIDE

GOPAL MISRA

A New Delhi-based independent columnist offers an in-depth study. The views expressed are his own

India cautious and alert as US opens its cards

Joe Biden, at his first meeting as US president with Group of Seven leaders, discusses plans to defeat the novel coronavirus, reopen the battered world economy and counter the challenge posed by China

The world is quietly watching Biden administration's new policy initiatives comprising reassurance to the allies as well as dealing with the strategic challenges and the formidable economic readjustments worldwide. The world appears to be reconciling to the Covid-19 and its impact, though Chinese continue to refuse sharing of any data regarding the leak of the coronavirus from its facilities in Wuhan during the last quarter of 2019. For most of the world, the initial responses of the American efforts appear to be soothing, but much will depend upon how the Chinese respond to the issues of peace.

Meanwhile, there was a sense of relief, when the Defense Minister, Rajnath Singh, told the Parliament that the almost the nine-month-long stand-off between the Indian defense forces and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has ended. There were not much details were available, but it could have been a part of the Chinese strategy to win the confidence of the new US administration. Earlier, there were reports that the Chinese ambassador Cui Tiankai in Washington and Kurt Campbell, Indo-Pacific coordinator at the National Security Council, had quiet meeting, but no press-release was issued.

Efforts are being made to understanding the implications of the telephonic conversation between the US president, Joe Biden, and the Chinese autocrat, Xi Jinping. The two leaders have pledged to find common ground where they can, including on topics such as climate change and the issues related to liberty and democracy.

In spite of Biden's team reiterating that they intend to maintain the Trump administration's more adversarial approach to China, but countries like India, Australia and Japan are awaiting the peace initiatives from China. The Secretary of State Antony Blinken had told Senate during his confirmation hearing that China "poses the most significant challenge of any nation state to the United States," but the US policy initiatives are being awaited worldwide.

It is yet to be work out the impact of the Joe Biden's first conversation with Xi Jinping. The US side claims that the president was straight, and focused without rhetoric. He expressed his concerns about "growing restrictions on political freedom in Hong Kong." The question is whether the new administration is asking for the restoration of the "two systems in one China" philosophy committed during the Deng era. It is hoped that the talks may lead to "much more meaningful dialogue with China.

Biden's caution is natural. He knows the Chinese seek "super power status" without any delay. However, there are variations in the report about the high-level discussions made available to the media by the Chinese and the White House text. During the conversation, Xi reiterated, according to the Chinese television channel, CGTN, that cooperation was the only choice and that the two countries need to properly manage disputes in a constructive manner. It did not mention the human rights issues raised by Biden. Earlier, there were variations in the text of the discussions between the US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and the senior Chinese foreign affairs official, Yang Jiechi. The White House document says that Blinken has stressed "the United States will continue to stand up for human rights and democratic values, including in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, and pressed China to join the international community in condemning the military coup in Burma (Myanmar)",but the Chinese media deliberately avoided

mentioning these issues. It also did not mention about the US concern regarding the Chinese policy in threatening the delicate stability in the Indo-Pacific, including across the Taiwan Strait, and its undermining of the rules-based international system. In the Middle East too, Chinese have already occupied key ports.

With his long experience in the Senate and White House, Biden is aware of the growing economic and strategic influence of China in the every region of the world. The autocracy in Russia under Vladir Putin too has concerns to the Biden administration. The new president is quite aware of the "dirty game played by the Russian proxies during the US presidential election in 2016", and the growing economic ties between Russia and China, especially in the field of the supply of the petroleum products. China has signed long-term agreements with the Russian petroleum companies buying their products estimated to be of more than four billion US dollars. It is also noted that the Russian dependence on China has increased during the past three years due to the growing reluctance of the Western Europe, maybe under the US advice, to reduce gas supplies from Russia. Biden during his vice-presidency had cautiously blended principle and pragmatism in 2009 in evolving a new working relationship with Russia; however, in 2012, the relations deteriorated when Putin returned to the presidency.

Another headache for the Biden administration is that European Union is unable to prepare a strong strategy to prevent the growing Chinese influence in the economy, where the Chinese capital is being welcomed. The British government appears to have already succumbed to the Chinese pressure due to the Chinese investment. Its nuclear power stations are already under the management of the Chinese companies.

The Chinese penetration in the western world is quite deep. The Chinese influence has also grown in Africa and Latin America. Much to the discomfiture of the new administration, the Chinese

Biden is aware of the growing economic and strategic influence of China in the every region of the world. The autocracy in Russia under Vladir Putin too raises concerns to the Biden administration

presence is now spread to all continents. It is obtaining strategic minerals from Latin American countries. In Africa, the countries like South Africa, Nigeria and Ethiopia have received huge investments in recent years.

The growing Chinese influence in Latin America undermines the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, which was invoked during the 1962 Cuba Crisis the then US president John F. Kennedy, who had forced the USSR and its leader Nikita Khrushchev to remove the nuclear-missiles from Cuba. However, in recent years, the Chinese investment has multiplied many times from the Rio Grande (a river, which originates from the southwestern United States flows through northern Mexico to submerge in the Gulf of Mexico) to Tierra del Fuego (the archipelago or group of islands is being shared by Argentina and Chile).

It is rightly hoped that Biden's vast legislative experience will enable him to work out more detailed and durable foreign policies across the continents. His predecessor, Donald Trump mostly depended upon executive orders, but with his efforts to win the law makers (the democrats do not have majority in Senate), he may be able to win and harness "the American will, power" for reasserting its global role.

There is a growing realization that Biden and his team has to be very careful in its initial interactions with the Chinese. Biden faces a real challenge of convincing the world that America still deserves the power it once yielded. The world, now under the shadow of the Dragon, is keenly watching whether the US is slipping on the global stage.

There is little reason for India to lower her guards, the events unfolding in the neighborhood, Myanmar(Burma), Afghanistan and Iran need much more caution in coming months. However, a relaxed atmosphere on her borders and less noisy statements from Washington, may enable her to evolve her own strategies in the region.

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COLUMN

SPOTLIGHT

KUMKUM CHADHA

Kumkum is a political journalist known for her no holds barred writings. An author of several books, her latest "The Marigold Story: Indira Gandhi and Others"won critical acclaim. Conferred several awards for fearless writings, Kumkum also served on the National Committee on Jail Reforms

Rahul Gandhi: To be or not to be is the question

The Congress needs to fill its leadership vacuum. As of now it seems headless with Sonia Gandhi taking a backseat and Rahul Gandhi a reluctant leader who takes a holiday at the drop of a hat

From suit boot ki sarkar, to publicly hugging Prime Minister Narendra Modi to hum do hamare do has been a long haul: nearly six years.

It was in 2015 that Congress scion Rahul Gandhi returned to India after his controversial vacation. Participating in a debate in Lok Sabha, he had then described the Modi government as "suit boot ki sarkar".

"Yours is a government of big people, a suit-boot sarkar," Gandhi had then said.

The obvious reference was to the expensive, name striped suit that Prime Minister Modi had worn during US President Barack Obama's visit to India.

Fast forward to July 2018: Rahul Gandhi speaks in Lok Sabha but this time his actions speak louder than words.

During the debate on the no-confidence motion, Rahul walked across, crossing several aisles, towards the Treasury benches to where Prime Minister Modi sat. All eyes were on him. There was suspense on what he would do next. Rahul Gandhi did the unexpected: gave a tight hug to a startled Prime Minister who took a few minutes to recover.

He also said that he was thankful to the Prime Minister and the BJP for teaching him what a Hindustan and Hindu means: "It means that even if someone attacks you, ridicules you, and calls you 'Pappu', you love them," said Gandhi.

In a single stroke Rahul stole the show, somewhat relegating the entire debate to the background. The entire day, the talking point was the "hug and wink moment" as it came to be popularly known. As if the hug wasn't enough, Rahul added a wink: except that was directed at a Congress PM.

Many interpreted this as a gimmick; but there were others who weaved politics into Rahul's Modi-hug. The Aam Aadmi Party said that Modi often hugged heads of foreign countries, so what was wrong in Rahul Gandhi hugging the Prime Minister? Some saw it as a gesture meant to poke fun at Modi and "paying him back in the same coin" given that Modi's hugs have grabbed headlines in the past when he, against all protocol, has embraced several world leaders.

Modi's hugs or full-bodied embraces, it may be recalled, were a talking point when Modi went abroad or a foreign dignitary came to India. His bear hug often made headlines be it the one to Barack Obama or Donald Trump, former US Presidents, his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbot, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman, or Russian President Vladimir Putin among others. Even Pakistan's Nawaz Sharif was not spared.

At another level, there was a raging debate on whether Rahul Gandhi's hug was spontaneous or pre-planned. While this remained inconclusive, many felt that it was a well-thought out strategy aimed at stealing the show from Modi, BJP and the entire no-confidence debate in Parliament. If that were the intention, then Rahul Gandhi decidedly won the round.

On talking points, one must grant that Rahul Gandhi's, one liners be it "suit boot ki sarkar" or any other have resonated with the average Indian.

The latest was his jibe during the general discussion on the Union Budget in Lok Sabha earlier this month. Here it was both words and action: words that were scathing and action that touched a chord.

Stepping up the attack against the Government over the controversial farm laws, Gandhi well-articulated his criticism, taking on Modi at the outset.

It may be recalled that Prime Minister Modi had, in his reply to the discussion on

One cannot fault Rahul Gandhi on his holidays: it is the timing that poses a problem. The last time he took a vacation was a day before the Congress Party's 136th Foundation Day. This was also when farmers had converged on the borders of Delhi

the motion of thanks to the President's address, said that the Opposition did not speak about the "intent" and "content" of the three farm bills. Gandhi deftly used that to hit back: "I thought", he told the Parliament, "I should make him (Prime Minister) happy today and speak on the content and intent of the laws" Gandhi said as he attacked the contentious farm laws for their as problematic "content" and dubious "intent".

In a well-formulated response, he said the content of the first law was to finish the mandis; its intent 'to give one friend' the right to have all the crops of India. The content of the second law was to end the essential commodities act and its intent was 'to help the second friend'; while the content of the third law is that when a farmer goes before the biggest businessman of India to demand the right price for his crops, he will not be allowed to go to the Court." Amid applause from the Opposition benches, he said that to think that this is a farmer's protest is a grave error: "This is India's protest" he said, as his party colleagues thumped their desks.

This was kind of a soft-opening. There was more to come: a jibe and a gesture. Resurrecting the pre-Emergency family planning slogan, "hum do hamare do" Gandhi turned the tables on the Modi government by saying that only four people are running the government: "Everyone knows who they are". The oblique reference was to Prime Minister Modi and Union Minister Amit Shah working in tandem to allegedly benefit well known industrialists. Gandhi was careful not to name anyone but it was none other than Parliamentary Affairs Minister, Prahlad Joshi who ended up taking names of the two corporates: "He (Rahul Gandhi) is claimingthat 40 percent of the groceries and other vegetables, are kept in Adanis and Ambanis. Let him prove it, he should place it on the table," Joshi said.

What, however, touched a chord was Gandhi's gesture of observing a minute's silence in the House as a mark of respect for the farmers who had lost their lives during the protests. Gandhi's act put the ruling party in a dilemma: damned if they do and damned if they don't kind of a situation. Ceding to Gandhi request would mean they were in agreement; ignoring it signalled that they were insensitive to the deaths.

That evening was easily Rahul Gandhi's. He had bettered his own record: from suit boot ki sarkar to the famous hug to hum do hamare do.

One cannot take away from Gandhi his ability to embarrass the Government: be it with his jibes, wise cracks, actions or gestures. It does not matter whether his lines are being written by someone or they are his own: what matters is that they are meaty enough to merit a response: sometimes from none other than the Prime Minister himself.

But the question that stares everyone in the face is: Is this enough? Can optics help fill the political vacuum? Are Rahul Gandhi's one-liners a substitute for sound politics? Clearly no and it is on this count that the Congress needs to set its house in order.

For one it needs to fill its leadership vacuum. As of now it seems headless with Mrs Sonia Gandhi taking a backseat and Rahul Gandhi a reluctant leader who takes a holiday at the drop of a hat. One cannot fault him on his holidays: it is the timing that poses a problem. The last time he took a vacation was a day before the Congress Party's 136th Foundation Day. This was also when farmers had converged on the borders of Delhi. In 2019, when protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act were at a peak Rahul Gandhi was in South Korea.

During crucial state elections, Rahul Gandhi was hardly visible. He addressed very few rallies: four in Maharashtra and two in Haryana. The Party's poor performance in Bihar led Rashtriya Janata Dal's Shivanand Tiwari to say that while the elections were on, Rahul Gandhi was on a vacation in Shimla. The Congress, Tiwari, said was a "non-serious player".

Tiwari is not off the mark. The way things are, the Congress is running helter-skelter. It has failed to control the exodus of senior and consequential leaders like Jyotiraditya Scindia who was considered close to the Gandhis. Earlier Sachin Pilot had raised a banner of revolt and though he bought peace, he is still sulking.

The leadership also failed to respond to the letter written by the group of 23 on the leadership crisis in the Congress. Ghulam Nabi Azad, Kapil Sibal and others had written a letter to Mrs Sonia Gandhi last year demanding sweeping changes in the Party.

While on Azad, Prime Minister Modi made enough overtures to the outgoing leader while bidding him farewell on his last day in the Upper House. He said that if the Congress failed to utilize Azad's services, his doors are open: "I will not let you retire" Modi said. Speculation is rife about the political significance of Modi's message.

That notwithstanding, Rahul Gandhi needs to go beyond words and shed off his to be or not to be attitude. He needs to take the plunge and lead from the front. He has to don the mantle and resurrect the Congress rather than be a one step forward and two backward kind of a politician. His words may win hearts but it is votes that count. As things stand, on that front there is a big question mark. (ends)

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Bastar's artisans find e-commerce platform

Shobha Baghel, who makes handicrafts using fibre extracted from the agave plant locally called kekati, is now all set to sell her products online via the Loka Bazar website, writes

DEEPANWITA GITA NIYOGI

Shobha Baghel's nimble fingers weave magic. An artisan based in Parchanpal village of Bastar district in Chhattisgarh, Baghel is adept at making attractive handmade products like totes, hanging dolls, sling bags and dining mats from sisal, a fibre extracted from the drought-tolerant fleshy agave plant, often used as a live fencing in plantations.

Baghel, who heads the Jai Maa Saraswati self-help group formed in 2017, also acts as a master trainer and teaches those willing to learn the craft. "There are 12 members in my group, but all of them do not work. I make a range of products from sisal, which resembles jute, and is obtained from agave plants. My group buys the material also widely used to make ropes from a few men who carry out the extraction process in the district. The forest department is helping grow agave in Bastar, also known as kekati locally. The fibre is extracted after crushing the leaves," she said.

Bastar divisional forest officer Stylo Mandavi informed that the forest department generally promotes agave. A certain amount of financial support has been extended to a men's self-help group for the extraction purpose as well as for the making of ropes from the strong and durable fibre. The department also uses the rope made by them.

After the fibre extraction is carried out with the help of a machine which is quite a simple process, the threads are dried. For the extraction, the leaves are flattened and then the machine is used to remove the fleshy part. Lastly, the leaves are dipped in water to remove any attached particles.

Initially, Baghel had received training from the Chhattisgarh Khadi Gram Udyog Board for six months during which she also received payment of ₹500 on a daily basis. This was in 2004. Before this she had no idea of sisal but enjoyed the session thoroughly. The Bastar artisan informed that while totes take up to two days to make, small items like wall decor takes a full day to complete. "I usually finish my household chores first and then take up the craft work. I am currently imparting training to others as well who come to my house to learn. At least, three people are with me in this initiative. The price of my products ranges from ₹300-500. Of late, the extracted fibre costs ₹160 per kg. Earlier, it used to cost only ₹22-25 per kg."

Baghel used to sell her products locally, especially at the scenic Chitrakote waterfalls on the Indravati river near district headquarters Jagdalpur. She has also taken part in exhibitions and fairs like the Suraj Kund Mela in Faridabad, Haryana in 2015. Sunita Nag, who works with Baghel, took six months to learn how to make sisal items. Now, she comes regularly and sometimes takes her excess work load home. As it is a painstaking work, Nag works for four hours every day.

Finding the right platform

The recent launch of the Loka Bazar initiative, an exclusive platform for Bastar's artisans, is all set to give a fresh lease of life to people like Baghel who need a platform to showcase their products to sell across India and even internationally.

Gaurav Kushwaha, one of the brains behind Loka Bazar, said artisans in Chhattisgarh will get good exposure through e-commerce across India. "Till now, our artisans used to sell their products in the state itself as they are all based here. So, this kind of initiative gives them the right platform and helps in creating brands under which artisans' names are also showcased," he added.

Shobha Baghel's brand is called Sheeshal on the website. Kushwaha explained that Loka bazaar will connect artisans to potential customers directly and help deliver products after direct procuring and packaging. At present, there are some 15 artisans under this and short videos are also being made on individual artisans. Other than Sheeshal, Loka Bazar also stocks other famous Bastar art forms like tuma (lamps made from dried gourd shells). As artisans need steady income, the initiative is aimed at giving them market throughout the year.

The state government is also supporting the initiative as part of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission. Kushwaha said that the idea of creating individual brands for each artisan has been appreciated by the district collector as well. "We are promoting the artisans directly and collaborating with the government for this. Products are being sold under the name of each individual artisan."

Kushwaha's friend and business partner Ayush Shrivastava said all of us behind Loka Bazar wanted customers to know about the artisans as many of them have won laurels at the state as well as the national level. "We have also introduced the concept of a gift card from artisans. Loka means local kala or art and we want to highlight Bastar to the world," Shrivastava added.

Government support

District programme manager Raj Kumar Dewangan pointed out that Baghel's training was part of the village enterprise programme under which women's SHGs can also take loans for different initiatives. "We have also created an artisan producer organisation called the Bastar Kalagudi Hastashilp Producer Company Limited which is owned by the various artisans of Bastar and monitored by the district administration. The company was registered in January this year." As mostly the artisans are dispersed across the district, they have been brought under one umbrella. Right now, the focus is only on Bastar but it will spread to other areas of the state gradually.

Jai Maa Saraswati, a self-help group formed in 2017, helps women in making attractive handmade products like totes, hanging dolls, sling bags and dining mats from sisal, a fibre extracted from the drought-tolerant fleshy agave plant, often used as a live fencing in plantations

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← 'Love yourself a wee bit more'

Writer-filmmaker **Tahira Kashyap** has shared a long post about self-love and appreciation. She also drew comparison of her strong body with that of reality TV personality and model Kendall Jenner. Tahira recently posted a picture on Instagram. In the image, she is seen taking a mirror selfie in her bathroom posing in a white vest and boy shorts. Alongside the image, she spoke about Kendall's pictures going viral after she did a photoshoot for her sister Kim Kardashian's brand of lingerie. She also mentioned how her strong frame helped her save three people from getting stuck in the lift. Tahira wrote,"Kendall and her tiny thong pictures are all over the internet and like many women I, too, wondered how is it freakin possible to look like that! The belly button is just a seductive slit or more like a 'kala tika' we put on kids and I don't know how that tiny portion of cloth could hide her essentials especially down below." "Moral of the story is don't wait for dysfunctional closed doors to open the way to love yourself a wee bit more#selflove #wearyoursexualitywithpride #appreciationpostforself", she added.

← SIMILAR ABUSES AT DIFFERENT SCHOOLS

PARIS JACKSON FACED 'SIMILAR EXPERIENCES' AS PARIS HILTON IN SCHOOL

Child abuse Even stars aren't spared

Model Paris Jackson, daughter of late king of pop Michael Jackson and nurse Debbie Rowe, says she went through similar abuse at school as Paris Hilton. Jackson attended a reformatory school in Utah and she shared that she identified with the treatment endured by Hilton, who recently testified in court about the physical and emotional abuse she suffered during her time at school. "I went through some very, very similar experiences with those kind of teen places. She's been through a lot and it's amazing to see her come out of the other end... a diamond," Jackson told Hilton's mother Kathy for C Magazine, reports femalefirst.co.uk.

↑ Miss India World eyes Bollywood

Miss India World 2020 **Manasa Varanasi** would like to try her luck in Bollywood if something interesting came up, but for now she is focused on representing the country in the Miss World pageant. She adds that her curiosity for new challenges prompted her to participate in the beauty pageant.

"I am an explorer and I have always looked for new opportunities to try something new. If there is something interesting that comes along the way, I am sure I would be interested to take it up, but right now, my focus is entirely on the next leg of my journey, which is the Miss World competition. It's a huge responsibility as I would be representing the country at an international platform," Manasa said. Born in Hyderabad, the 23-year-old is an engineer and a financial information exchange analyst.

CONCEPT OF DATING CHANGES EVERY YEAR'

Sunny Leone
(In an interview)

theStack

INDIA TODAY; INDIA TOMORROW

By Baijayant 'Jay' Panda; Rupa; 320 pages; ₹395

India was marching ahead to become a significant power at the world stage. But then COVID-19 struck, leaving the country — as also the rest of the world — reeling under its catastrophic impact. While it gives the pandemic a good fight, India mustn't lose vision of the future that its leadership had envisaged for it. How indeed does the India of tomorrow look like? And how do we get there, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic? Edited by Baijayant 'Jay' Panda, this volume offers a navigation plan from India today to India tomorrow in the voices of the very people holding the reigns to the future. India has an arduous road ahead of it. What it needs to do is to not lose sight of the goalpost and a strategic approach. This book is that strategic plan. The author is is National Vice President of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

DARK HORSES

By Susan Mihalic; Simon and Schuster; 352 pages; ₹1,984

Fifteen-year-old equestrian prodigy Roan Montgomery has only ever known two worlds: inside the riding arena, and outside of it. Both, for as long as she can remember, have been ruled by her father, who demands strict obedience in all areas of her life. The warped power dynamic of coach and rider extends far beyond the stables, and Roan's relationship with her father has long been inappropriate. She has been able to compartmentalize that dark aspect of her life, ruthlessly focusing on her ambitions as a rider heading for the Olympics, just as her father had done. However, her developing relationship with Will Howard, a boy her own age, broadens the scope of her vision. In much the same way that V.C. Andrews's Flowers in the Attic transfixed a generation of readers, Susan Mihalic's debut is set to a steady beat that will keep you turning the pages.

HAVE YOU MET THE ANGLO-INDIANS?

By Anastasia Damani; Penguin; 48 page'; ₹199

Did you know that after the British left India in 1947, many British families decided to stay back and make India their new home? They came to be known as Anglo-Indians because their families were of both British and Indian descent. The Lovedales are one such family. Meet Aunty Joyce and Uncle Charlie; their two wonderful children, Rosie and Leslie; and a third child who's rather fluffy, Penny-the-Pom, a Pomeranian. Come, discover Anglo-Indian food, festivals and lingo with the Lovedale family! Learn to cook yummy treats, decorate your Christmas tree with DIY ornaments and plan an Easter egg hunt. Also find out about iconic Anglo-Indians such as Ruskin Bond and Derek O'Brien. So let's get started, men! Anastasia Damani is an illustrator-turned-author, musician and theatre lover. When she's not donning one of these hats, she likes curling up with a warm cup of tea.

A BUSINESS PLATFORM TO RULE IN POST-COVID ERA

New book talks about the importance of platform business models in an economy, particularly in the post-Covid world

ENTREPRENEUR-AUTHOR Sangeet Paul Choudary explains the importance of platform business models, the forces that power their rapid scale and the factors that will cement their dominance in a post-pandemic world in his new book. "Platform Scale: For a Post-Pandemic World" explains the inner workings of platform business models and their ability to scale rapidly. The book tells how the decade leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic witnessed the rise of platform business models as they drove stock market gains and extended their influence across economic and political activity. The pandemic has accelerated these platforms further, it says, adding Apple, Google, Alibaba and Amazon have made strong inroads into the health-care industry.

The book, published by Penguin Random House India, serves as a maker's manual, helping executives design and build platforms, and provides a lens to analyse the shifts currently underway and their implications for future platform-scale businesses. The first edition of *Platform Scale* was published in 2015 and it was an outcome of this growing fascination to unpack the inner workings of business models in a networked world. This new edition significantly updates the original text and thesis to help executives understand the ever-increasing importance of platform scale in a post-pandemic world.

According to Choudary, author of "Platform Revolution" and founder of Platformation Labs, as we move towards a post-pandemic world, digital platforms are increasingly mediating economic and social interactions. "Their growing influence — in terms of wealth creation for their shareholders, but more importantly in terms of the positive and negative impact they have on all of their other stakeholders — is one of the defining shifts of our time," he writes.

He says as the platform economy grows, there are two simultaneous forces at play. "Platforms allow greater market participation and democratize market access, empowering many ecosystem actors while doing so. At the same time, platforms concentrate data advantages and leverage AI and machine learning to harness this data for greater control over their ecosystems, often engaging in practices that may discourage competition and lead to the commoditisation of other players," he says. Choudary feels the central dilemma in any platform-mediated ecosystem will be tension between openness and control.

From Tehelka Archives
March 23, 2002

Media and cricket young-bloods: Wide bawl

The Indian media seem to be in its usual hurry to crown the latest crop of cricket youngsters, but perhaps a little caution is called for till they prove their international worth, says **SHAMYA DASGUPTA**

The Indian selectors, all of a sudden, seem to be sitting right in the middle of a pile of names to choose a limited set from. "Embarrassment of riches" is the oft-used phrase to describe the situation. And why not? We seem to have a number of contenders for every single position in the team. At least that's what the media wants the world to believe. But look deeper; read between the lines, and one discovers that the massive talent pool we have is no different from the pools we have come up with in the past, and squandered. Almost as a force of habit.

To start with, however, it is imperative that we clear the misconceptions doing the rounds. We do not, repeat do not, have as heavily talented a pool as we are being made to believe. Yes, the youngsters, the whole set, seem to have come good finally. Yuvraj Singh, on his nth comeback trail, Dinesh Mongia, Mohammad Kaif, etc, have actually done what was expected of them. Maybe a bit more. Ajay Ratra as wicketkeeper has also shown signs of talent in the same league as the Nayan Mongias and Kiran Mores of the world. Zaheer Khan too, seems to have shaken of the demons that start haunting him each time he comes good and the team starts expecting results from him. Ajit Agarkar, riding the favours captain Sourav Ganguly and Sachin Tendulkar have bestowed on him, finally did enough to warrant a regular slot in the one-day line up.

A bit of research, however, proves that the "coming good" of the youngsters is actually the direct effect of a smart decision taken by the selectors. Quite unwittingly though, to be fair to their detractors, they picked the youngsters in the first half of the series — for the first three matches against Zimbabwe. And not in the second half, when the Indians are traditionally already a match or two down. So the reason why a technically and temperamentally sound Hemang Badani failed, and subsequently went out of favour, was reversed in this case. Like mentioned earlier, unwittingly, because neither would Mongia have hit the opener's slot, and nor would Kaif have found a middle order position vacant, had Tendulkar and Virendra Sehwag been fit.

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So, in a way, the "smart" decision of the "bunch of jokers" was actually one that was thrust upon them.

But, at the end of the day, Kaif and Mongia did grab their opportunities with a straight bat, and improvised enough to come in contention for a regular spot in the team. Mongia, of course, has been picked in the squad for West Indies. Compare and contrast this now with the treatment meted out to Punjab youngster Reetinder Singh Sodhi. Sanjay Bangar is suddenly being talked about as the next Robin Singh for the team, where Sodhi had already done enough to fill the void. In all the departments of the game, for the one-day format at least, Sodhi is eons ahead of Bangar. And, significantly, a decade or so younger. He had to sit out soon after making a laudable debut, because he walked into the team in the second half of the series against Australia in 2000, and after the series was over, the selectors reverted back to their original choices.

We have progressed no further than where we were before the Zimbabwe series. In fact, on some scales, we have fallen behind, because now we have a team that hasn't progressed very far, but believes it has traversed a few light years. Even West Indies is no real test. England on its own is not a real test either. But England and West Indies, both in their backyards, combined, is a real test for sure. Let's keep the champagne on hold for a while. Let's arrange for some security for these youngsters so that the ad world doesn't reach them, the same way bookies have been prevented from getting close to the players. Let's wait for them to prove themselves worthy of the stardom before we label them such. The champagne can start popping after that.

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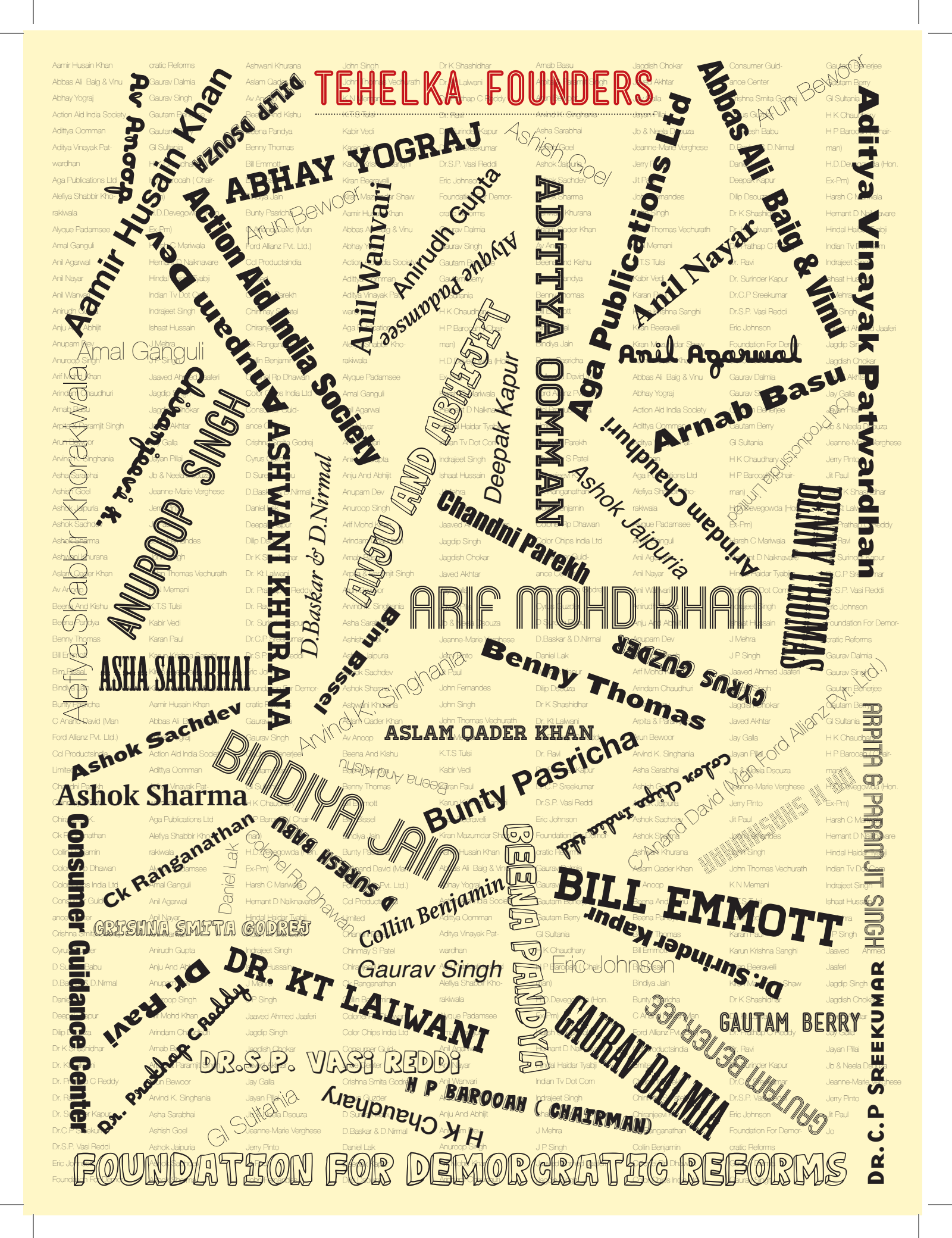
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